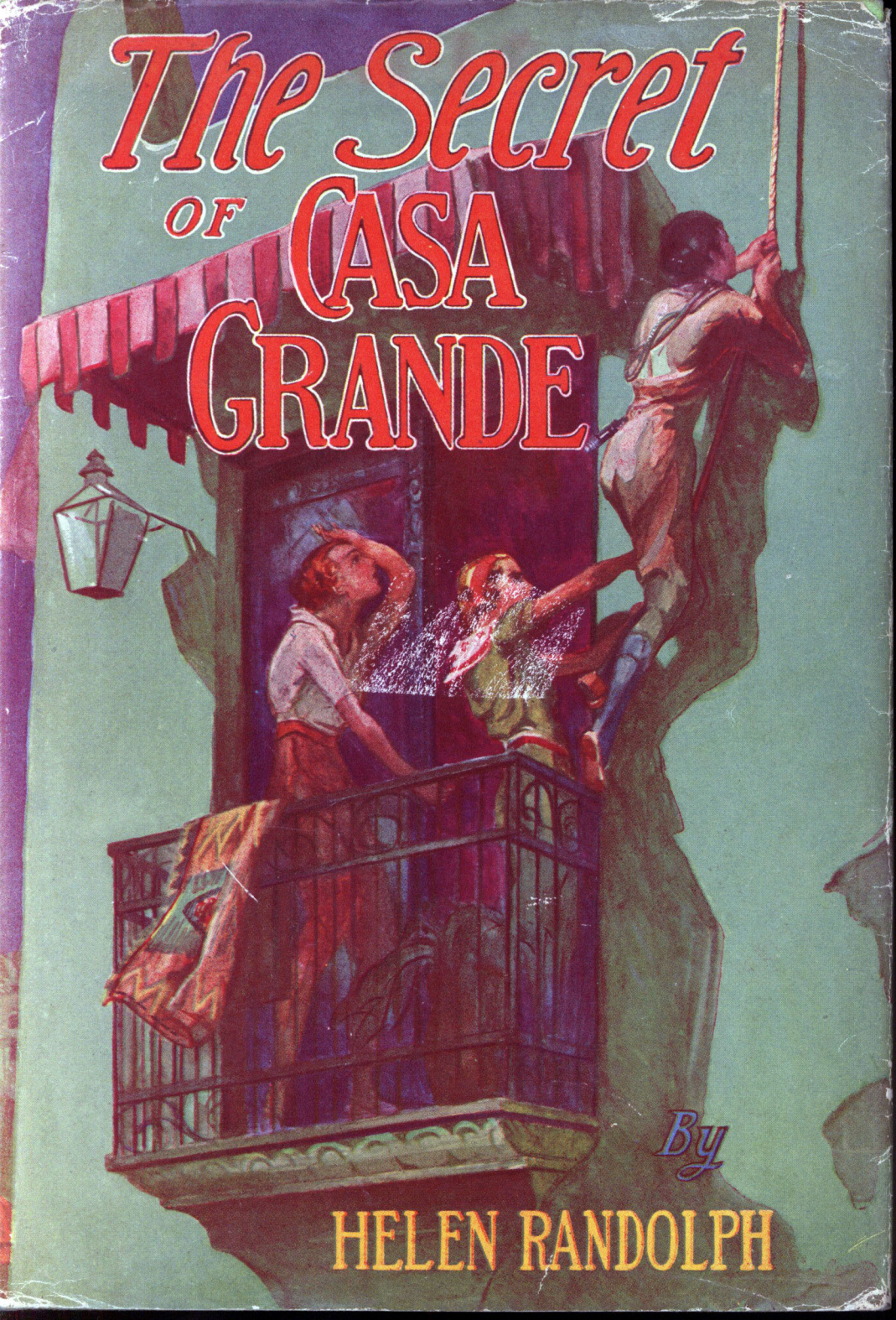
The Secret of Casa Grande



By

HELEN RANDOLPH

THE SECRET OF CASA GRANDE

By Helen Randolph

Down into Mexico, the land of cactus and mystery, go Jo Ann and Peggy to spend their vacation visiting a school chum, Florence Blackwell. The strange customs of the natives are a source of wonder and interest to the girls.

One day Jo Ann notices that in the back wall there is a barred window which has no opening into any of the rooms in the ancient adobe house. She determines to learn where the window leads, but the ever-watchful Felipe hinders her exploration plans.

Taking no heed of the dangers of her adventure, Jo Ann climbs to the roof, and then finds that she is marooned there during the terrific midday heat.

Finally the three girls manage an entrance into the secret room. The dangers they encounter there, and the surprising discovery they make, brings this mystery story to a thrilling and unexpected climax.

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Maxine from Billie

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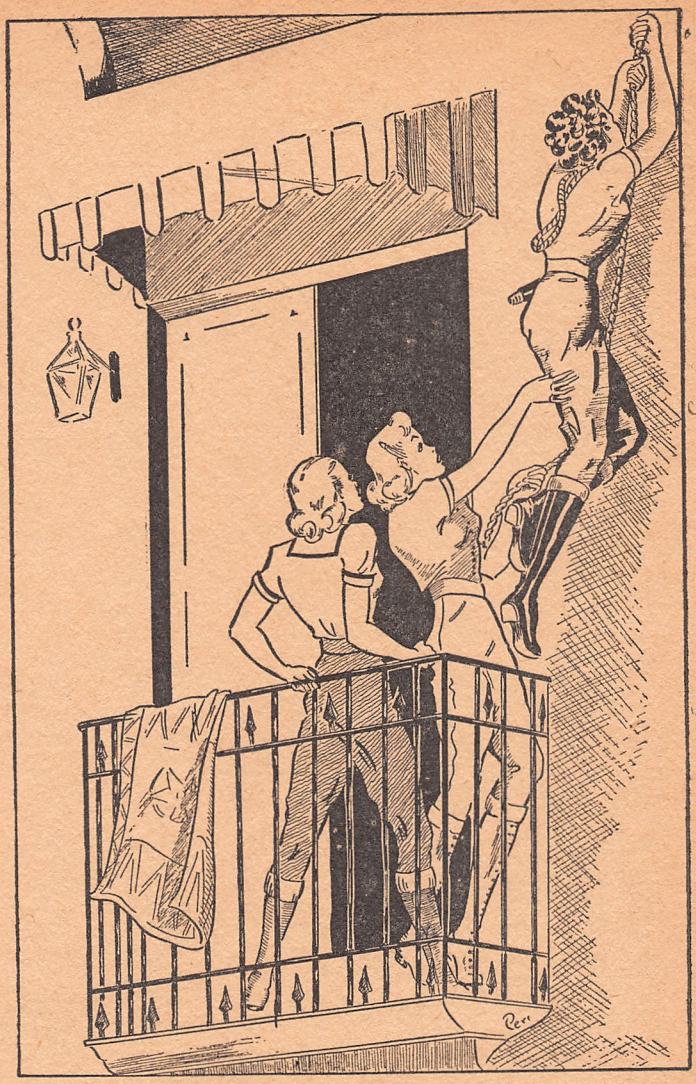

Four strong arms caught her before her feet touched the floor of the balcony.

THE SECRET OF CASA GRANDE

HELEN RANDOLPH

THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING COMPANY
Akron, Ohio New York

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The Saalfield Publishing Company

Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER I

THE MYSTERIOUS WINDOW

AROUSED BY a slight noise in the room, Jo Ann sleepily tossed back the turbulent black curls from her forehead and slowly opened first one eye, then the other. She lay staring half dazedly as the solid doorlike shutters swung back, letting the rays of the morning sun filter into the room through the iron bars of the window. Where was she? Why the iron bars?

Slowly her gaze traveled over the room, taking in the high, heavily beamed ceiling, the bare plastered walls, and finally resting on Peggy sleeping peacefully beside her. Everything floated again before her mind's eye: their long trip to Mexico, their midnight arrival at this great old stone house, and their warm welcome by Peggy's friend, Florence Blackwell, whom she had never seen before.

The next moment the Indian woman, who

had wakened her by opening the heavy shutters, noiselessly crossed the room and began arranging dishes on a small table beside the bed.

"Buenos dias, señorita [Good morning, miss]," she said softly in Spanish as she noticed that one of the girls was awake.

"Ah—*buenos dias,"* stammered Jo Ann.

Again the woman spoke to her, but Jo Ann shook her head. After the woman had repeated her words very slowly, she was able to understand a few phrases.

Disturbed by their voices, Peggy suddenly sat up in bed, opening wide her dark-fringed hazel eyes. She, too, was startled for a moment by the unfamiliar surroundings; then, noticing the servant and the expression on Jo Ann's face, she burst out laughing. "What's the matter, Jo?" she asked teasingly a moment later. "Can't you understand what she's saying?"

"I think she's trying to tell me something about Florence, but I'm not sure. I wonder where she is."

Almost simultaneously there burst into the room a small trim girl with smooth fair hair and

gentian-blue eyes. "Good morning, sleepyheads," she laughed, dropping down on the foot of the bed and fanning herself with a large sun hat. "Girls, this is Juana. Did she deliver my message?"

"She tried to," Jo Ann replied, "but I'm afraid she wasn't very successful."

Turning to the servant, Florence spoke rapidly in Spanish.

Juana grinned broadly, bowed to the girls, and jabbered something they could not understand.

"She's trying to tell you how happy she is that you have come to stay with her Florencita," explained Florence.

"Tell her that we're delighted to be here," put in Peggy promptly.

"How I envy you—being able to speak Spanish that way, Florence," Jo Ann sighed. "I'd give anything to do half as well."

Florence smiled. "Oh, you'll get on to it in no time." As she had lived more than half of her sixteen years in Mexico, Spanish was perfectly natural to her. It seemed so simple that some-

times she found it easier to express herself in Spanish than in English.

"Though I've studied it two years, I have my doubts about ever being able to speak it fluently," said Jo Ann slowly. Noticing Florence's flushed face she added, "Where've you been? What time is it?"

"Almost ten o'clock. I've just been to market."

"To market? Why didn't you call us?"

"Well, I knew you girls would be tired and sleepy after your trip, so I didn't disturb you. I go to market early every morning. I like to do the buying myself."

"Promise you'll call me next time. I didn't come down here to lie in bed and sleep all the time. There's too much to do and see."

"All right, then; I'll call you tomorrow. But come on, let's have breakfast. I'm ravenous after my walk, and I know you two must be starving."

"If having breakfast served in bed is your idea of our helping you to keep house, then I'm all for it," declared Peggy gaily as she flopped her pink-pajamed legs over the side of the bed. "It suits my taste exactly."

Florence nodded smilingly toward Juana. "It wasn't my idea. It was hers. She'd be terribly hurt if we didn't let her wait on us. After you two get rested from your trip, though, I'll set you to work planning meals and cooking—and everything."

"Well, I'm going to enjoy being waited on as long as I can," laughed Peggy.

Sitting on the side of the bed, clad in their gay pajamas and eating their breakfast from an exquisitely inlaid tea table, Peggy and Jo Ann felt very sophisticated indeed.

"This is the most delicious orange juice and the best toast I've ever tasted," declared Jo Ann, a moment later.

"It's the best breakfast I've ever eaten in my whole life," added Peggy with her usual exaggeration.

Florence turned to the servant, who had just returned with a plate of hot toast, and repeated their remarks in Spanish.

From that moment Juana was their devoted slave, anticipating their every wish.

As soon as they had finished breakfast, Jo Ann and Peggy dressed for the street, Florence

insisting, much to their disapproval, that they wear hats. "The sun is too hot here in the middle of the day to go out without something on your head," she explained.

While Peggy was arranging her hair in neat auburn waves, Jo Ann, who had finished her hasty toilet, stepped to the door leading into the hall and stood taking in every visible detail of the strangely constructed building. The immense rooms, each opening onto the long central hall, seemed dark and gloomy, owing to the thick walls, the concrete floor, the heavy doors, and the iron-barred windows. Though the bright-colored rugs, the gay-flowered chintz, and a few well-chosen pictures added a cheerful homelike note, the general effect was one of austere simplicity.

Having noticed Jo Ann's interest, Florence came up beside her and, slipping her arm around her waist, asked, "How do you like our house? It's very old, you know."

"I love old houses," Jo Ann replied quickly. "This one is extremely interesting—so different from anything I've ever seen." She hesitated,

then added, "I've been thinking of studying architecture when I go to college."

"Would you care to see the rest of the house? There are some rather unusual features about it."

Jo Ann's dark brown eyes sparkled. "I'd adore it!"

"I, too," put in Peggy, who had come out in time to hear Florence's words.

Florence pointed to the open door on the right. "This is the sitting room, but Mother and I stay in the office with Dad more than in here. Come on and I'll show you the office." She led the two girls across the hall, but stopped a moment later, saying, "The office door's closed—Dad probably has a patient—but I can show you the other rooms. The kitchen is the most interesting room in the house, I think."

She took them into the dining room and on to the end of the long hall, then turned into an immense room having three large windows all heavily barred.

"My goodness, you could 'most put our whole house into this one room!" exclaimed Peggy.

"I've never seen such a huge kitchen before in a private residence. Why do you suppose they built it so large?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. It's the strangest house I've ever seen. Just look at that fireplace, for instance." Florence motioned toward one side of the room, which was entirely taken up by a huge fireplace set back in a broad arched recess. "It's large enough to belong to some big hotel—and yet we've only two bedrooms in the house."

"But why did they build the fireplace in three sections? All the fireplaces I've ever seen were built on a level with the floor. This one reminds me of the 'Three Bears.' This section belongs to the great big bear; and this one——"

Florence broke into a peal of laughter at Peggy's whimsical idea. "No one but you would have thought of that," she said.

Juana glanced up from her preparations for lunch, smiling to herself. She had not seen her Florencita happy for months—not since her mother had been taken ill and had been sent to a sanitarium for a several weeks' stay.

As their laughter died away, Florence went on to explain, "You see, the lowest section—in the middle—was where they built their fire to cook the food; this section here, of medium height, was where they made their *tortillas.* It's just the right height for the *metate,* the stone on which corn is rubbed or ground into a paste. There's room here for several women to work at the same time."

"But what was the great big bear's section used for?" interrupted Peggy.

"The highest one was used for draining the dishes and earthen cooking utensils. Each section is covered with smooth hard stones, and here in the corner is a small hole left to let the water drain off. It was a very well-equipped kitchen in its day."

Florence was delighted to find that her guests were so interested in the old house which had been her home for many years. She went on to explain that although modern equipment had been installed wherever possible, they had tried to leave the quaint old atmosphere undisturbed.

While she was answering Peggy's questions

about the new equipment, Jo Ann was busily taking in the details of the architecture, especially noting the absence of woodwork in the queer windows that had iron bars and no glass.

As her gaze wandered to the window at the end of the room, she caught a glimpse of something which sent a little thrill of excitement over her. She crossed the room quickly and stared through the iron bars at what seemed to be the ruins of an ancient building. Could this be the ruins of one of those old cathedrals which she had read about and had wanted to see for so long?

"What's this old building back of your house, Florence?" she asked eagerly.

Peggy rushed over to the window to see the building that had caused the note of excitement in Jo Ann's voice, while Florence merely smiled and replied, "That's a part of a very old church, now used only by the poorest peons."

Jo Ann's eyes opened in surprise. "I don't see how they can use it—it looks as if it were falling down."

"The main part of the church is all right, but

they never use the other part. I don't know whether it was partially destroyed in a war or whether it just caved in from old age."

"How old do you think this church is?"

"I don't know exactly, but it's several hundred years old. I've heard that it's one of the oldest buildings in this part of Mexico. All the better classes of people attend the large modern cathedral across the Plaza."

"May we go over to the old church? I'd love to see it."

"Why, yes, we'll have time to go over there before lunch. There isn't much to see, so it won't take us long."

Florence turned and said something in Spanish to Juana; then the three girls started out of the kitchen door. "Before we go," Florence added, "I'll show you this other room just across the hall—there's nothing interesting or unusual about it, though. It has only one window looking out on the back street. There's nothing but the back of that old church to be seen from it."

After glancing about this room they hurried

on down to the street, Jo Ann in the lead. She could scarcely wait to visit the old church.

As they started across the street, Peggy looked longingly toward the Plaza and the crowded streets of the business section of the city. She much preferred sightseeing in that direction, but she knew Jo Ann had set her heart on seeing the old church and that there was no changing her.

A few minutes later the girls passed under the old stone arch and into the vestibule with its font of holy water, then walked softly on into the church.

Having come in from the bright sunlight, they were unable at first to distinguish anything except the candles burning on the altar. A reverent silence lay over the entire building. With her finger to her lips Florence motioned Jo Ann and Peggy to a bench. They sat down quietly, careful lest they disturb the peacefulness of the place.

As their eyes became accustomed to the dim interior, they noticed several figures with black shawls about their heads and shoulders, kneel-

ing at the altar. A woman with a baby in her arms and a tiny, half-naked tot beside her was kneeling before the statue of Mary, Mother of Jesus, her lips moving in silent prayer. Direst poverty was evident among all the worshipers.

Many minor details that had escaped Peggy's eyes caught and held Jo Ann's attention. The benches, altar rail, and pedestals, she noticed, were hand hewn and decorated with exquisite carving; the statues were different from any that she had ever seen; and even the candles were unusual—probably hand dipped, she decided.

For almost an hour they sat there silent, Jo Ann intent in absorbing the atmosphere of this ancient building.

"I feel as if I'd actually stepped back through the centuries into the Mexico of ages past," she thought dreamily.

By this time Peggy had begun to get restless. To her the place seemed close and stuffy, the odor and fumes of the candles suffocating. Without saying a word she rose and went outside. Leaning against the wall in the shadow of

the stone arch, she waited for the girls and amused herself by gazing idly at the rear of Florence's home across the street.

"Florence, I don't like to make remarks about your house," she said, half smiling as Florence and Jo Ann drew near, "but from the rear it looks more like a fort or a prison than a home."

"It reminds me of an old castle with its high stone walls and heavy iron bars at the windows," added Jo Ann, gazing over at the house.

Florence smiled good-naturedly. "It doesn't look very homelike, I'll admit. I don't believe I've ever noticed it before from this viewpoint. I never come to this old church—at least, I haven't been here for several years. As I said before, only people of the lowest classes attend this church."

"I didn't see a window in your hall," Jo Ann suddenly remarked to Florence. "I thought I noticed a shaded light burning on that little table at the end of the hall."

"There isn't a window in the hall—it's dark as pitch there, and we have to keep a light burning day and night."

"Then how do you account for that little narrow, crosswise opening up there in the wall? There it is on a level with the top of the kitchen and back bedroom windows."

"I don't know." Florence gazed puzzledly at the small opening. "I've never seen a window like that on the inside of the house, and I know I've seen every inch of the walls inside."

"Well, there it is—a tiny window, just as plain as the nose on your face."

In silent amazement Florence stared at this narrow opening high up in the bleak stone wall.

"That certainly is strange!" she said finally, her brows drawn together in a thoughtful frown.

"It certainly is," agreed Jo Ann and Peggy, equally mystified.

Everything was forgotten now except this queer window. Why was it there? Into what did it open?

CHAPTER II

THE SEARCH BEGINS

"THIS IS the strangest thing I've ever heard of," declared Florence as they hurried back to the house, eager to examine the rear wall from the inside.

"How long have you lived here, Florence?" asked Jo Ann. "I'm sure I'd have seen that window long before this if I'd been in your place."

"We've lived here about eight years, but, as I told you, I've only been in that church a few times, and I've never walked down that back street."

"Lived here eight years and never walked back of your own house!" exclaimed Jo Ann in surprise. "Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"But you don't understand," Florence replied. "It isn't exactly proper for me to wander down that back street."

Both girls opened their eyes wide in astonishment.

"Not proper to go back of your own house!" ejaculated Peggy. "The very idea!"

"Yes, you see it's only a narrow street leading to one of the poorest sections of the city. Only the very lowest class of people live on it. Mother and I drive down on the next street sometimes, accompanied by Felipe, to carry food and clothes to the destitute families, but I've never been down that narrow street."

"It must be something like it is on the street cars at home," Jo Ann said thoughtfully, coming to Florence's assistance. "You know how they are, Peggy—one section marked 'Colored,' and you never sit there."

Up the long flight of stairs they ran to the Blackwells' apartment, each girl eager to be the first to solve the mystery. Jo Ann's long legs carried her ahead of Florence and Peggy, who arrived a moment later out of breath.

There stood Jo Ann staring blankly at the solid plastered wall at the end of the hall.

"I'm sure this is where that window ought to be," she said finally in a perplexed tone.

"There certainly isn't any sign of one that I can see," added Peggy, while Florence gazed silently at the spot where she thought the opening should be.

Just then Juana ran in from the kitchen to see what had caused so much commotion in the silent old house. "Florencita! *Que es* [What is it?]?" she asked in alarm.

"It's nothing," replied Florence in Spanish. Understanding the superstitious nature of the Indians, she thought it wiser not to tell Juana about this mysterious window for the present.

Juana stared in shocked surprise. Something was wrong, she was sure. Young ladies of the best families did not deport themselves in such a manner. Her Florencita had never acted this way before—racing into the house like mad. Finally, shaking her head and mumbling to herself, she returned to the kitchen to finish her preparations for lunch.

The moment she disappeared through the kitchen door, Jo Ann hastened through the one

opposite and called to Florence and Peggy, "Come on, maybe we can see something from the window in this back room."

Much to their disappointment, the iron bars, set in the deep recess of the thick walls, prevented them from seeing anything except a part of the ruins of the old church directly across the narrow street.

"And so the mystery deepens," laughed Jo Ann. "I've heard of bumping your head against a stone wall, but I've never understood what it meant till now."

"Do you know what I think it is?" remarked Florence as they wandered back to the hall. "At one time there probably was an opening here"—she motioned toward the solid wall at the end of the hall—"then, sometime when they were fixing the house over, they closed it up. This house is very, very old, you know."

"But why would they leave a hole on the outside?" Peggy asked.

"Oh, they probably didn't think it mattered on that back street, and maybe the stones didn't fit or something. These walls are so thick, you

know, it wouldn't make any difference. It's too small to be a window, anyway."

"Maybe so," commented Peggy, "but it sounds funny to me."

Jo Ann was silent. She was thinking—thinking hard. She thoroughly agreed with Florence that the house was old, but she was sure that the opening had not been left by a careless mistake.

"There's a reason for it," she told herself, "and I'm going to find out what it is."

Just then Florence's father, Dr. Blackwell, a tall, distinguished-looking, gray-haired man, came up the stairs. "Good morning, young ladies," he greeted them pleasantly. "You look quite fresh and rested after keeping such late hours."

"We're feeling the best ever," Jo Ann answered.

"Well, you certainly look it," he declared, glancing from one to the other. "Florence, you have more color in your cheeks than I've seen for a long time. Miss Jo and Miss Peggy are having a good effect on you already."

"Oh, Daddy, we're having a wonderful time!

But did you know there's a mystery about our house? We've just made the queerest discovery!"

Dr. Blackwell laughed. "What is it, may I ask —some mysterious writing on the wall, or a pot of gold?"

"Neither. We've found a window that isn't a window. It opens on the outside of the house but not on the inside."

"Well, now, that's strange, isn't it?" he replied smilingly, as though humoring a small child.

"Really, Dr. Blackwell, there's a mysterious window that should open at the end of this hall!" exclaimed Jo Ann, "but we can find no trace of an opening ever having been there."

At that moment Felipe, combination chauffeur and house boy, announced lunch, and the subject was dropped as they all hastened into the dining room.

Peggy and Jo Ann were surprised to find, after their late breakfast, that they were quite hungry. As Felipe and Juana passed back and forth waiting on the table, Jo Ann thought how convenient it was to have servants who could not understand what you said. You didn't have to be nearly as

careful as you did at home with the Negro servants.

"I thought you girls might like to see something of our city," Dr. Blackwell remarked as they were eating their dessert. "I've arranged for Felipe to take you for a drive this afternoon. I'd thought I'd be able to accompany you, but a doctor's time's never his own, so I'll have to depend on Florence and Felipe to show you the city."

"That 'll be fine!" exclaimed Peggy. "But we're sorry you can't go with us. Aren't we, Jo?"

Jo Ann nodded an emphatic assent and then went on to remark to Dr. Blackwell, "We saw something very interesting this morning—the old church back of your house. I've been reading early American history a good deal lately, and this church seems very much the same type as the old missions in California."

"Well, well!" smiled Dr. Blackwell in surprise. "I thought the modern young girl used her pretty head solely for thinking of frocks and furbelows."

Peggy laughed. "Jo Ann hates dress-up

clothes. She'd live in jodhpurs or knickers and shirts, if her mother didn't make her get out of them occasionally. Jo's enthusiastic over horses and dogs and swimming, but her chief hobby is nosing around old buildings."

"There's so much mystery and romance connected with historic buildings," Jo Ann put in, shining-eyed.

"If you're looking for mystery and romance," Dr. Blackwell remarked, "there's plenty of it to be found in this part of the country—that is, if you can only find the key to unlock it. I've been so busy studying the ancient system of sanitation—or lack of it—that I've had no time for anything of that sort."

"If you get Jo started along that line she'll never stop," put in Peggy with a teasing glance at Jo Ann.

Dr. Blackwell smiled. "Then I'll turn her over to a friend of mine—a prominent lawyer, who'll be delighted to discuss the early history of this country with her. You know whom I mean, Florence—Señor Rodriguez."

Florence nodded.

"He has the best equipped library in the city," continued the doctor, "and you can dig into the past to your heart's content, Miss Jo."

"That 'll be wonderful!" cried Jo Ann excitedly. "I know I'll enjoy meeting him and seeing his library. I adore books—especially about old historic buildings."

As they rose from the table Peggy remarked, "Jo and I want to run across the Plaza to buy some postcards to send home. Do you want to go with us, Florence?"

Florence and her father exchanged smiling glances as she replied, "You can't buy postcards now—the stores close for an hour or two in the middle of the day."

"Oh, I forgot I'm in Mexico," laughed Peggy.

"In tropical countries it's the custom to take a siesta after lunch," Dr. Blackwell explained. "People sleep in the hottest part of the day and do their work in the cool of the evening. It's a very good custom, too, since the sun has a tendency to cause fever if one is in it too much."

On hearing this the girls meekly followed

Florence to their room, and when she removed her dress and shoes and dropped down on the bed, they followed her example.

"How still it is!" thought Jo Ann. Not a sound floated up from the street below; not a leaf stirred on the trees in the park across the way. Even nature seemed to be sleeping, so deep, so intense was the stillness.

Florence, from habit, was soon sound asleep. The other two girls whispered quietly for a while; then Peggy's eyelids drooped, and she, too, succumbed to the restful quiet.

But Jo Ann could not sleep. There were too many things to think about. A visit to the Señor's library—she'd love that. And that old church across the street—there must be some very interesting facts connected with it. She'd find out more about that later from the Señor's books. But that window! It still puzzled her. There was something curious about it. What was that Dr. Blackwell had said about finding the key to unlock the mystery?

"That's what I'll do—find the key and unlock the mystery of this strange window," she told

herself. "Won't Dr. Blackwell be surprised when I tell him I've solved it?"

Acting on a sudden impulse she slipped out of bed quietly so as not to disturb Peggy and Florence. What she was going to do, she wanted to do alone. She put on her dress and some rubber-soled shoes, then, picking up a large sun hat from a chair, softly opened the door.

There at the head of the stairs sat Felipe, sound asleep. She hesitated only a moment, then crept softly past him and on down the stairs.

"One good thing about these houses is there's no danger of a loose board or a creaky step giving you away," she thought.

Not a soul was in sight outside—not even a dog. Quickly she ran down the street and around the corner, but drew back as the terrific heat struck her face. Heat waves radiated from the cobblestones, and the white stone walls, acting as double reflectors, turned the narrow street into a veritable furnace.

But nothing could stop her now. There was something she wanted to find out about the rear wall of the house. Pulling her hat down farther

over her face, she squinted her eyes and gazed up at the glaring white walls above her. Quickly she scratched three marks on the wall, one directly below the kitchen window, one beneath the back room window, and the third beneath the mysterious opening; then she paced off the distance between the marks. She was positive now that she could mark the exact spot on the inner side of the wall where the opening should be.

Eager to escape from the intense heat, she hastened back to the house.

"Whew, it's hot!" she exclaimed to herself. "These Mexicans show good judgment in sleeping at this time of the day. I don't blame them in the least."

Fanning herself with her hat, she dropped down on the lower step to cool off a moment. How refreshing was the coolness of the great hall! She wondered how it was possible to be so cool here and so hot outside.

She listened intently for a moment, but not a sound came from above. Apparently everyone was still asleep.

Softly she slipped up the stairs, step by step,

till she caught a glimpse of the sleeping Felipe just as she had left him, his chair tipped back against the wall and his head dropped forward.

There was only one more step now. Holding her breath, she lifted her foot; then suddenly there was a loud bumping noise. She was so startled she almost lost her balance. Clutching at the wall, she stared before her. Felipe, roused by some strange instinct, had let his chair down with a bang.

"No—no—no! *Muy mal* [Very bad]!" he exclaimed, pointing to her face. He patted himself on the head and talked rapidly in Spanish in an effort to make her understand that the sun was "bad for the head," as he expressed it.

Much disgusted with herself for getting caught, and eager to escape, she called back *"Sí, sí* [Yes, yes]," and hastened on to her room. Now that her plan to measure the hall had been interrupted, she would have to wait till a more opportune time for that. Searching for paper and pencil, she decided to do the next best thing—put the outside measurements down so there 'd be no danger of forgetting them.

She was sitting by the window busily drawing a plan of the house when Florence called in a surprised voice, "Why, Jo Ann! Where have you been? Your face is as red as a beet."

"It's nothing," she replied. "I just went down and measured the position of those windows on the back wall. And was it hot!"

"You mean you've been down there in the sun!" Florence could hardly believe her ears. "Jo, you shouldn't have done that."

At the sound of voices Peggy opened her eyes, then sat up in bed to stare at Jo Ann. "For goodness' sake, Jo, what 've you been up to now?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," Jo Ann answered crisply. Why couldn't they leave her alone? She hadn't committed a crime.

"But, Jo, your face! You're so hot."

"Well, if you must know, I've been searching for the key with which to unlock the mystery—as Dr. Blackwell suggested."

CHAPTER III

A NEW DISCOVERY

LOOKING COOL and dainty in their fluffy summer dresses, the girls came lightly down the stairs, ready for their drive around the city.

Florence smiled as she noticed the car waiting at the curb. It had been rubbed and polished till it shone, and Felipe, beaming like a child with a favorite toy, was leaning over, brushing a speck of dust off the hood.

Snatching off his hat on seeing the girls and grinning widely, he hastened to open the door of the car; then, standing very straight, he waited for them to be seated. His effort to uphold the dignity of his position as chauffeur was amusing. After tilting his hat—an old one of Dr. Blackwell's—at a rakish angle, he proudly took his place at the wheel. Although the car was not as new and expensive as some they passed, he was sure none carried more beautiful passengers.

To the girls' delight it was much cooler now; soft breezes were stirring, and the heat was vanishing with the sun, which was sinking behind the high range of mountains to the west of the city.

Slowly Felipe passed the cathedral and circled the attractive little plaza, while the girls gazed admiringly at the formal beds of brilliant blooming flowers and drank in the perfumed air, heavy with the fragrance of wild orange and oleander. Now and then through the foliage of the trees they could catch a glimpse of the bandstand in the center of the trees.

"They have band concerts two nights a week here," Florence explained. "We'll promenade awhile tomorrow night. I know you'll enjoy it."

"Promenade? What do you mean?" asked Peggy.

"Why, walk around the Plaza. On the nights when the band plays, the people of the better classes gather here and either promenade around the broad walk outside the square or sit on the benches to talk and listen to the music."

"That sounds as if it 'd be lots of fun," approved Peggy.

At this moment the car came to a sudden stop. In attempting to turn off the broad drive around the Plaza into one of the old narrow streets of the business section, they were held up by the congested traffic. The enforced rest did not bother Felipe in the least. Calmly resting his elbows on the steering wheel, he waited for the way to become cleared.

"Why doesn't he blow his horn?" asked Jo Ann. "Maybe that 'd make them move." She noticed, however, that of all the persons in the near-by cars held up in the traffic jam, not one seemed the least bit impatient.

"These people must have the patience of Job," said Peggy. "If this were at home, you'd hear the horns blowing all down the line."

"It takes more than a little thing like this to ruffle the slow, easy-going Mexican," explained Florence. "He's never in a hurry."

In a short time they were on their way again, moving slowly through the narrow, busy streets. All classes of people and many nationalities were

here, their different modes of dress interesting Peggy and Jo Ann, as did the stores with their queer signs and window displays. Although this was the busiest time of the day, they noticed that there was none of the bustling rush characteristic of American cities.

On through the less crowded streets Felipe steered the car into the residential section, passing several beautiful cathedrals and small parks artistically laid out around the statue of some noted general or other war hero.

Near the outskirts of the city Jo Ann noticed with the keenest interest that there were all types of architecture, from plain stone structures built centuries ago and looking dull and drab, on to modern bungalows, gay with bright-tinted stucco and tiled roofs. Now and then she could catch glimpses of richly furnished rooms behind the iron bars of a window, and a flower-adorned courtyard or patio through an open door.

"I love the courtyards," she remarked. "The great arches, the fountain in the center, and the tropical plants make them beautiful and restful-looking."

"Yes, they are delightful," agreed Florence. "Señor Rodriguez, the lawyer Daddy told you about, has one of the most beautiful patios in his house that I've ever seen. You'll enjoy seeing it when we go over to see his library. I've wished many times that our house had a patio."

"I've been wondering why it doesn't, since all the other old houses have them. There's something strange about the way your house is built. I believe when we solve the mystery of that queer little window, we'll find out some interesting things about the rest of the house."

"Is that the cathedral and the Plaza already?" asked Peggy in surprise just then. "How did we get here so soon? I've had such a wonderful time that it seems that we've only started."

"May I ask a favor, Florence?" asked Jo Ann as they drove up before the house. "Let's drive down that street back of your house before we go in."

"Why—I—I don't think——" began Florence stammeringly, then stopped, hardly knowing what to say.

"You said we couldn't walk down there, didn't

you?—and I do so want to see it," Jo Ann urged.

After talking to Felipe a few moments Florence answered with a half-apologetic smile, "Felipe says *mañana* he'll take us."

"Mañana?" repeated Jo Ann. "Oh, you mean tomorrow?"

"Yes, it's too late now."

Jo Ann turned to Felipe, who was opening the door for them. *"Por favor,"* Felipe," she begged.

"Please, Felipe," added Peggy quickly. She was not particularly interested in going down that back street, but it was so pleasant to be out at this time of the evening that she disliked the idea of going back into the gloomy house.

"He says he'll take us if we insist," translated Florence a moment later, after talking to Felipe again. "But really, girls, I feel that we shouldn't go now. It 'll be better to go some morning."

"I can't see what difference it 'd make when we go. Come on." Jo Ann could not understand the Mexican's way of putting off till tomorrow anything he did not care about doing. When she made up her mind to do a thing, she wanted to do it *right now*. "It's silly to make so much fuss

about such a simple thing," she thought. "Why can't you drive down a street when you want to?"

"Well—all right," Florence reluctantly agreed at last.

Dusk was falling as they turned into the cobblestoned street back of the house. Slowly they made their way over the stones—century-old stones, worn smooth by the tread of many feet.

The farther they drove the more thickly populated the street became. Jo Ann and Peggy were shocked by the utter wretchedness and abject poverty which they saw on all sides. Dirty, half-clad peons with their empty baskets or trays were shuffling homeward after their day's labor in the city; old crippled men and women, who had begged all day on the streets, were wearily dragging themselves to a place of shelter for the night. The small windowless adobe huts which lined each side of the street seemed overflowing with people. Women with babies in their arms squatted in the narrow doorways, while dogs, pigs, and goats wandered in and out of the houses at will, as much at home as the children. As for

children, they were everywhere—dirty, naked, half-starved looking.

"I never imagined anything could be so terrible," shuddered Peggy. "Did you, Jo?"

Jo Ann shook her head soberly. "I didn't realize there was such poverty anywhere."

A shout rose down the street: *"Americanas! Americanas!"*

Children appeared from every direction. They crowded around the car. Some of the larger ones climbed up on the running board and the fenders.

"Centavo, mees! Centavo, mees [A penny, miss! A penny, miss]!" they cried, holding up dirty, scrawny little hands to them.

"Oh, Florence!" begged Jo Ann. "Let's stop and give them something."

"If we stopped now, we'd never be able to start again." Florence explained quickly. "They'd climb all over us. Let's throw some pennies out the windows."

Hurriedly they emptied their purses of all the pennies they could find and threw them far into the street.

Such shouting and scrambling as followed! The children fought and knocked each other down in their effort to find the pennies, the tiniest ones crying because they could get nothing.

"It's pitiful—heartrending—these children fighting over pennies as starved little animals over a bone," thought Jo Ann. How was it possible for such things to exist, almost at your very door, and yet to be absolutely unseen and unknown? Was this really a part of the beautiful city they had enjoyed seeing such a short time ago?

Felipe could scarcely drive without hitting some of the children, yet he dared not stop. He had not wanted to bring the girls down here, as he felt sure Dr. Blackwell would object, but since they were here he must take care of them. While the children were busily searching for the scattered pennies, Felipe managed to escape the crowd. Quickly he drove to the end of the street and turned down an old, dry, rocky river bed, the car bumping and swaying as it sped along over the rough cobblestones.

"Florence!" shouted Jo Ann above the noise as

she clung to the side of the car to keep from falling over on Florence. "I take back everything—I said—about you coming down—here alone. I understand—a lot that I thought foolish—before I saw this with my very own eyes."

"We won't have to go far—on this rough river bed," Florence called back a moment later. "We'll turn—at the next corner."

"This is the—widest river bed I ever saw—to have so little water in it," put in Peggy above the noise.

As the car turned into the next street Florence replied, "Sometimes when it rains hard in the mountains this river's full of water." She paused and added, "This is the street Mother and I've come down frequently to bring clothing for the poor families."

Just then some ragged little children near by began to wave their hands and call out, *"La Señorita! La Señorita!"*

Florence smiled and waved back. "Those are some of the children we've given clothes. They look as if they need some more."

"I wish we had some pennies to give to these

children, too," said Jo Ann. "Let's come back here sometime and bring them something."

In a few more minutes the adobe huts were left behind, and they began passing the plain stone houses of the middle class. With long-drawn sighs the girls settled back against the cushions, each thinking of the distressing poverty she had seen.

Suddenly down the street directly in front of them Jo Ann spied a tall, ungainly object against the high stone wall.

"What's that, Florence?" she asked.

"That? Oh, that's a scaffold the workmen are using in doing some repair work on a house."

"But why don't they use ladders?"

"They'd have a time to get a ladder long enough to reach the top of these houses. When they build them, they use big derricks to lift the heavy stones."

"Then why do they build their houses so high?" asked Peggy.

"It makes them cool," Florence answered as the car turned off the narrow street onto the pavement around the Plaza.

"Why, we're almost home!" exclaimed Jo Ann in surprise. "Is it possible that this is part of your house?"

"Not exactly, but it's all connected into one long building," she replied, wondering at Jo Ann's interest.

"Oh, then that's the very thing!" Jo Ann cried, beaming.

"Whatever are you talking about, Jo?" asked Peggy.

"Why, how to get up on top of the house, of course! Don't you see—I can climb up that scaffold to the top of the house; then it 'll be easy to let a rope down to the mysterious window. I've been wondering how I'd ever get on top of the house—it's so high.

"But, Jo, you can't do that!" gasped Florence in alarm. "It's too high, and anyway——"

"You're not going to do it," declared Peggy emphatically. "You might get hurt."

"Don't be silly," scoffed Jo Ann. "I haven't broken my neck yet."

"No, but it isn't your fault," Peggy retorted.

"But, Jo, suppose someone should see you!"

exclaimed Florence. "You must give up this foolish idea."

"Would it be a disgrace if someone did see me?"

"Well, it isn't considered proper here for a young lady to do anything on the street which would attract attention. You'd be a regular circus, climbing that scaffold. The street 'd be jammed with people before you'd get halfway to the top."

"I'll promise not to give a free performance for the natives," laughed Jo Ann. "But what's to keep me from climbing up there when I wouldn't have an audience? There are times, you know, when people sleep."

"You couldn't go out in the street at night—alone!" The very idea of such a thing was shocking to Florence. "That scaffold's nothing but some rough poles fastened to the wall, and it's so high it 'd be dangerous—not at all like climbing a ladder."

The car drew up before the house, and Florence and Peggy jumped out and hurried up the stairs without waiting for Felipe to open the

door for them, but Jo Ann lingered a moment to thank him for granting her request. She knew he couldn't understand a word she said, but from the broad grin which spread over his face she felt she had made her meaning clear to him.

The ride had meant much more to her than she had expected, since she had discovered a way of getting up on the roof. All she needed now was a length of rope so she could lower herself from the roof.

"It isn't going to be hard to do," she told herself as she went up the stairs. Of course, she would not do anything to disgrace Florence or Dr. Blackwell—they had been so kind to her—but give it up now? Never! Not with her goal almost in sight.

CHAPTER IV

JO ANN'S SECRET QUEST

ACCORDING to her promise to take the girls to the market with her, Florence called Peggy and Jo Ann the next morning as soon as she awoke. It was only half-past six, but the sun was already making a geometric pattern across the floor where it shone through the iron bars of the window.

Jo Ann was impatient to start the minute she had finished dressing. Yesterday she had looked forward to the trip only because it would be interesting, but now she was eager to find a store where she could buy the rope she needed for exploring the mysterious window. She knew that it would be difficult to make this purchase without Florence's finding out about it, but if she could only find where to get the rope she could return later, alone, and buy it.

"Oh, hurry up, Peg," scolded Jo Ann as she

stood in the doorway, waiting. "You've primped long enough. We're just going to market—no one 'll see you."

"But what's the hurry?" calmly inquired Peggy as she patted the waves of her auburn hair into place. "It wouldn't hurt your appearance any if you spent a little more time primping, as you call it."

"Well, if I were as fussy as you are——" Jo Ann began; then, leaving the sentence unfinished, she disappeared into the hall. There was no use arguing with Peggy. She just wouldn't hurry—every hair must be in place.

A few minutes later, when Peggy and Florence joined her in the hall, Jo Ann asked with a meaning glance toward Felipe, who was waiting with a split-cane basket on his arm, "Do we have to take him along?"

"Why, yes; he always goes with me to carry the basket," explained Florence in surprise.

"I'll carry the basket for you, and we won't need him," Jo Ann volunteered quickly.

Florence shook her head vigorously. "You're not a servant, Jo. I wouldn't think of letting you carry the basket. That would never do."

"Oh, well—all right, then. Just as you say."

Although she had smilingly agreed with Florence, she realized that it would be more difficult to carry out her plan with Felipe along. His keen eyes saw everything.

"Felipe reminds me of a faithful watchdog," she remarked as they started down the stairs. "I'm glad he can't understand English—there's some consolation in that."

This would complicate matters considerably, having Felipe along; still, she could not say more about leaving him at home.

"He's just eager to be of service, that's all," explained Florence.

"You should 've seen him yesterday when he caught me slipping up the stairs. You'd have thought he was a contortionist or something, from all the motions he went through in trying to tell me the sun was bad for my head."

"I can easily imagine how he looked," smiled Florence. "He is comical when he gets excited. I hope you girls don't mind walking," she added as they reached the street.

"No, we don't mind, only I won't be respon-

sible for my appetite when we get back," replied Peggy lightly.

"I think it 'll be wonderful to walk this morning," put in Jo Ann. "It's so cool and pleasant, and we can see more when we walk—not that I don't like to ride, of course."

Although the sun was painting the tops of the buildings with gold, the narrow tunnel of a street still held the cool freshness of the night. As Jo Ann drew in deep breaths of the invigorating morning air, she wondered what Florence would say if she knew her real reason for wanting to walk.

Chatting gaily, they strolled arm in arm, while Felipe followed a short distance behind.

All along the way there were many curious, interesting things that caught both Peggy's and Jo Ann's attention—peons with trays or baskets either balanced on their heads or set on little portable stands; women squatting on the sidewalks selling flowers and fruits, *tortillas, tamales,* and other foods; beggars waiting on every corner trying to rouse the sympathy of the shoppers.

While the lively, talkative Peggy plied Flor-

ence with question after question about the people and their strange customs, Jo Ann had an opportunity to peer into each of the queer little shops they passed. She even stared at all the little stands in the street, almost expecting to see a rope dangling from one of them, so intent was she upon her search. Even though everything imaginable seemed offered for sale, she found nothing that in any way resembled a rope.

"Where do they sell rope in this curious place?" she wondered. If she could persuade Florence to return home along another street, perhaps she'd find a store there where she could get it.

Her perplexing problems were forgotten a moment later as the market loomed before them. It was a huge old building occupying an entire block. The immense roof was supported by heavy stone columns and broad arches which showed signs of having been, at one time, tinted in bright colors but now looked dull and faded. The plaster was cracked and soiled, and in places great slabs had fallen off, leaving the bare stones exposed.

"Oh, I love this!" exclaimed Jo Ann. "It's one of the most interesting places I've ever seen. The people—their dress—their customs—the very atmosphere is different. It's hard to realize this is the twentieth century when you look around here."

"Yes, it is very old and much the same as it was centuries ago," replied Florence.

Stalls had been set up in every inch of available space inside the building. Some were piled high with golden tropical fruits—oranges, mangoes, guavas, bananas, pineapples; others were festooned with strings of onions, garlic, and red chili peppers—all very necessary to add a piquant flavor to the limited fare of the Mexican.

Slowly they made their way along the narrow, crowded passageways between the stalls, Peggy and Jo Ann stopping every few minutes to question Florence about the different things they saw.

Finally, after glancing at her watch, Florence stopped abruptly and exclaimed, "Gracious! It's after nine o'clock—I'll never get through at this rate—not if I stop to answer all of Peggy's

numerous questions." She laughed and gave Peggy's arm an affectionate pat. "Would you girls like to wander around and take in the sights while I finish my marketing?"

"Yes, we'd love to," promptly answered Jo Ann. "Wouldn't we, Peg?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"If you're sure you don't mind being left alone, I'll hurry on. Stay in this section of the building so I can find you." In a moment Florence and the faithful Felipe disappeared in the crowd.

Jo Ann was delighted to be free to carry on her search for a rope without fear of being questioned. Although she felt sure that Peggy would enter into her plans, she decided not to tell her about them just yet.

Grabbing her by the arm, Jo Ann jostled and pushed their way through the crowd, up one aisle and down another.

Suddenly the breathless Peggy halted. "Say—where's the fire?" she scolded. "I can't see a thing, trying to keep up with you. Why the rush?"

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean to hurry so fast," Jo Ann replied; then, realizing she dared not waste time arguing if she was to accomplish what she had started out to do, she added, "Can you keep a secret, Peg?"

"A secret!" repeated Peggy staring at her in surprise. "Of course I can—why?"

"Well, I'm trying to find a shop or a store—or whatever it is—where you buy rope in this place. You see, all I need is a rope—then I can explore the mysteries on the other side of that curious window."

"But why so secretive about——" Peggy stopped abruptly, it having dawned on her why Jo Ann had acted so strangely all the morning. "So that's why you didn't want Felipe along, is it?"

"Yes, he gets on my nerves. All the way here I could feel his eyes boring into my back every time I craned my neck to see something."

"You're imagining things, Jo. It's just your guilty conscience. He's really the perfect servant—very quiet and accommodating, but not inquisitive."

"Maybe you're right—but still I'm glad he's out of the way. Come on, we'll have to hurry, or they'll be back." She caught hold of Peggy's arm to keep from getting separated in the crowd, then continued, "You remember how horrified Florence was yesterday when I mentioned my plan to climb that scaffold—well, I don't want her to find out what I'm doing. It 'd only worry her, and I have no intention of giving it up."

A dubious expression crept into Peggy's hazel eyes. "I still think you're foolish to risk breaking your neck for something no more important than a hole in a wall."

"You never can tell, though, what might be behind the hole," said Jo Ann with an air of mystery.

"But, Jo, how 're you going to get a rope without Florence's seeing it? It 'll make a bulky-looking package, won't it?"

"If it does, I won't get it now. If we can only find where to buy it, we can slip back later. You've got to help me get it without Florence's and Felipe's seeing it."

"Well, all right, I suppose I'll have to do it

if you're determined to go on with your plans —but really I feel terrible about doing anything Florence doesn't approve of. She and her father 've been so lovely to us."

"But I'm not going to do anything to disgrace them. I wouldn't do that for anything. I really feel that they won't object at all after I've solved the mystery. Florence is just afraid I might get hurt climbing up on that roof. You know well enough I've done lots more dangerous things many a time."

Suddenly spying an Indian woman with a basket of exquisite roses, Peggy stopped, saying, "Forget about your old rope for a minute, Jo, and help me buy some of these beautiful roses. Aren't they the most gorgeous things you've ever seen? Ask her how much they are."

Jo Ann quickly raked her memory for the proper Spanish words to use in buying the flowers. *"Cuanto rosas?"* she asked finally.

While talking rapidly in Spanish, the woman picked up a long-stemmed, beautifully shaped bud of shell-pink color edged with silver, and then held up three fingers of her left hand.

"She says they're three *centavos* each," explained Jo Ann.

"Tell her I'll take a dozen."

"Un dosena," she repeated in Spanish.

"Is that all you do—just add an a to the English words—rose-a, dozen-a? I could do that," laughed Peggy.

"Don't ever think it's that simple, but there are several Spanish words which are much like the same words in English," Jo Ann explained, feeling quite proud of her superior knowledge.

As the woman had seldom sold more than three or four flowers at a time, she had great difficulty now in figuring the cost of a dozen. Finally Jo Ann offered her assistance, and after arguing for some little time, Peggy received her change and the roses, and they started on their way again.

"Gracious! I feel like a bride with all these flowers," laughed Peggy. "Suppose you take half of them."

"All right—that's the very thing." Jo Ann's eyes sparkled. "If I can only find the rope now,

I can carry the bundle under these flowers, and it won't be noticed."

A moment later Peggy called to Jo Ann to stop again. "Just look at these beautiful blankets! Feel how soft they are and see how beautifully the colors are blended."

"Yes, they are lovely. I've heard that they're all hand made by the natives—that the designs are handed down in the families for generations. But, Peg, we haven't time to stop here now."

"Just look at that blanket hanging over there! It looks like the rainbow, the way the colors are shaded into each other. Don't you love it?"

On receiving no answer from Jo Ann, Peggy turned around just in time to see her disappear in the crowd. Quickly she began pushing her way to the spot where she had last seen her.

"I don't relish the idea of getting lost in this crowd of people who can't understand a single word I say," she told herself, as she darted in and out among the slow, deliberate Mexicans.

After looking about in all directions, to her great relief she spied Jo Ann standing before an enclosed booth, piled high with baskets, *som-*

breros, hand-made chairs, and various other articles. Coming nearer she saw what had attracted Jo Ann's attention—several long coils of rope hanging near the back of the booth.

"Jo Ann Cutrer, what do you mean by running off like that!" she scolded.

With only a nod at Peggy, Jo Ann stood gazing at the rope, her forehead wrinkled in deep thought.

"Oh dear!" she murmured. "I can't think of the Spanish word for rope. What can it be?"

"Why don't you add an a to rope as you did before," suggested Peggy, smiling.

"Rope-a, rope-a," repeated Jo Ann several times; then her face brightened. "I believe that is the word. I'm sure I've heard that word before."

Turning to the man in charge of the booth, she repeated in Spanish, *"Cuanto la ropa?"*

The man looked amazed at first, then stared blankly at her.

"I want *la ropa,"* she repeated impatiently.

With a shrug of his shoulders, the man shook his head and pointed to another booth farther down the aisle. The next moment his face bright-

ened, and, reaching over, he handed her a basket.

"No—no!" exclaimed Jo Ann, frowning more deeply than ever.

"Maybe he doesn't understand what you're saying, Jo," Peggy suggested, smiling. "Maybe that's not the right word for rope."

"Something's wrong, that's certain," Jo Ann replied.

Turning to the man again, she pointed to the back of the booth behind a stack of *sombreros*. "See, I want that rope back there." A broad smile spread over his bronze face as he picked up several of the hats and handed them to her.

Jo Ann shook her head vehemently. "No—no."

Since the only thing left near the hats was the coil of rope hanging on a peg behind them, he handed her the rope.

"Sí, sí," she replied, and reached over to take the rope from him. "How much is it?" she asked in Spanish.

As soon as he replied she answered promptly, *"Bien*—I'll take it," and handed it back to him to be wrapped.

To her amazement he unfastened the coil and spread the rope out before her to show her how long it was, then jerked on it to show its strength.

"*Sí, sí*—that's all right, but wrap it up—and hurry, please."

"He's the slowest person I ever saw," she murmured to Peggy. "I'm afraid Florence 'll find us before I get it wrapped. I hardly think she'll notice it under these roses, do you?"

Once more the Mexican handed her the rope without any sign of wrapping and with one long end dangling from the loose coil.

"Jo, look!" Peggy put in quickly, pointing to the next booth. "They don't wrap their packages here. That's why he didn't understand you."

"Horrors! I can't carry it this way—what 'll I do? I'd like to——" She stopped suddenly as a familiar voice behind her exclaimed, "Oh, here you are! I've been searching everywhere for you."

Jo Ann dropped the rope as if it were a hot coal.

"I was beginning to think you girls were lost," Florence went on.

"Not lost, just misplaced," put in Peggy quickly to cover Jo Ann's confusion.

"Come on, we'll have to hurry now," Florence urged. "I know Juana's had breakfast waiting for us for a long time." She turned and led the way out of the market.

When they had gone only a few steps, Jo Ann suddenly gave a little gasp and catching Peggy by the arm exclaimed in a low voice, "Gee! I made a ridiculous mistake. I've just remembered what the word *ropa* means—it's clothes. I was asking the man for clothes! No wonder he couldn't understand what I meant!"

CHAPTER V

THE SIESTA HOUR

ALL THE WAY HOME from the market Jo Ann kept wondering what excuse she would make to Florence so that she might go back after the rope.

To her delight the opportunity came sooner than she expected. While the three girls were at the table lingering over their late breakfast, Felipe entered with a message for Florence from her father.

"Daddy needs my help for about half an hour in the office," she explained. "I often assist him in the simple cases. You girls amuse yourselves any way you wish while I'm busy."

"All right," Peggy answered promptly. "I believe I'll run across the Plaza to that curio store we saw yesterday and buy some postcards. I'd like to look at the curios, too."

"The sun's getting so hot now that you'd better

carry my parasol, if you're going out," Florence suggested over her shoulder as she left the room.

Although Jo Ann had not said a word, she immediately decided that here was her chance to go back to the market after the rope.

Jo Ann got the parasol and then hastened out the door, Peggy at her heels.

"Let's go back to the market for the rope first before we go to the curio store," Jo Ann suggested as soon as they reached the street.

"All right, but let's hurry so I'll be sure to have time to stop and get the cards," replied Peggy.

When they reached the market the crowd had thinned considerably, and without much difficulty they found the booth and bought the rope.

Peggy smiled widely as they left the booth and remarked teasingly, "I notice you didn't ask for *ropa* this time."

Jo Ann grinned good-naturedly. "No, I looked it up in my dictionary and found the right word for rope."

As it had taken longer to make the trip than

they had anticipated, Jo Ann hurried Peggy along.

"I've got to get this rope inside the house and hidden before Florence finishes helping her father."

Just as they turned the corner by the Plaza, Jo Ann halted abruptly. "Peg, look, standing there in the doorway—Felipe! I can't go past him, carrying the rope loose like this."

"Well—I'll tell you, Jo. We've forgotten the postcards. Let's go to the store and get them, and maybe by the time we get back he'll be gone."

To their vexation, when they returned to the same corner fifteen minutes later, they found that Felipe was still standing in the doorway.

"Look, Peg! The watchdog is still there. I'm not going to throw this rope away now that I've got this near home with it. What shall I——" She stopped abruptly. "I've got it! I'll slip it inside the parasol."

Putting her words into action, she closed the parasol and slipped the coil of rope inside.

Peggy laughed, "That's a funny-looking parasol, I must say."

"I don't care if it is funny. You walk close to me, and I'll carry the parasol between us. Now, how's that?"

"All right, I suppose—only I'm sure Felipe is wondering why we're not carrying it over our heads as we're supposed to do."

With an effort to conceal their amusement, they hurried on past Felipe and up to their room.

Quickly snatching the rope from its hiding place, Jo Ann threw it into her trunk and slammed the lid down with a bang.

"There now—I'm glad that much is done," she remarked with a sigh of satisfaction. "I hope I don't have as much trouble using this rope as I've had getting it."

Even as she spoke these words she began thinking of the many problems she still had to solve before she could reach the mysterious window. Would she be able to climb the crude scaffold? How would she be able to fasten the rope after she got to the roof? And how could she manage to do all this without being seen?

All through lunch and later that afternoon

during the siesta hour these questions kept racing through her mind.

Just as they had done the day before, Florence and Peggy quickly succumbed to the heavy, drowsy stillness. But not Jo Ann. The harder she tried to sleep, the more wide awake she became.

Finally in desperation she got up and sat gazing out of the window. How could she stand this quiet and inaction so long? Glancing down at her watch, she realized it would be at least an hour before Florence and Peggy were awake.

"Even being outdoors in the hot sun's better than sitting here doing nothing," she told herself.

No sooner had this thought entered her mind than she decided to go outside and examine the scaffold on the building at the end of the block.

"It 'll take only a few minutes, and I'll be back before the girls are awake," she thought.

Quickly she rose and slipped noiselessly out of the room and past the sleeping Felipe at the head of the stairs. Once outside she hastened on around the corner and looked anxiously down the street

to the farther end of the block to see if the scaffold were still there.

"Good! It's there!" she exclaimed to herself the next moment.

Without a thought about the extreme heat she ran down the street to the corner. As she gazed up at the high, crude scaffold made of peeled poles fastened together, a slight tinge of fear passed over her. How high it looked! And what a blank wall it was fastened on! There wasn't a sign of a window or opening—not even a ledge —to break the smooth, regular surface of the wall.

"That's the crudest scaffold I've ever laid eyes on," she thought, as she examined the hardwood poles which were fastened to the wall in several places by wooden pegs.

Near the top of the poles she noticed that there was a rough platform from which dangled a long rope with a bucket attached to the end.

"I wonder how the workmen get up to that platform," she thought.

Going over to the other side of the scaffold she discovered that deep notches had been cut at

regular intervals in one of the poles, for footholds. "So this is the way they get up! These notches look awfully far apart, though. I wonder if I could reach them."

Carefully she pulled herself up to the first notch, and then on to the second and third.

"Sure, I can climb this!" she exulted. "This is more fun than I've had in a long time."

Up she climbed to the platform and then scrambled over onto it.

While she was sitting there resting a moment, she was busily examining the rest of the scaffold to see if she could reach the top of the building. She noticed that, although there were no more notches cut in the pole, there was a crosspiece near the top to hold the scaffold in position against the building.

"If I can only reach that crosspiece, I know I can climb up on the roof," she told herself.

Cautiously she rose and, wrapping her legs and arms around the pole, slowly pulled herself up to the crosspiece; then balancing herself on it she climbed over the edge of the roof.

However, hot as she was, she knew that she had no time to cool off, since the siesta hour was almost over, and the girls would soon be awake.

"I must not get caught again," she told herself.

She looked hastily around the curious roof, noting with surprise that it resembled a flat cement floor with a low, thick stone wall around it.

"How on earth can I fasten a rope to a roof like this?" she asked herself in dismay. "While I'm up here I've just got to see the roof over that mysterious window. If it's like this, what will I do?"

Hurrying to the division wall, she scrambled over it, only to be confronted by another wall. Undaunted, she climbed over it, and then over still another, till she came in sight of a chimney.

"This must be the chimney of the big fireplace in the kitchen," she told herself.

Climbing up on the broad outer wall of the roof she peered over, trying to find the position of the mysterious window.

"Why don't they have window casings or

something to show where their windows are?" she thought in disgust.

She lay flat on her stomach and leaned farther out over the edge of the building. Although the hot stones burned her, she kept on persistently examining the surface of the wall below till she made out the outlines of the mysterious opening.

"Whew!" she exclaimed aloud. "I know I'm scorched."

She sprang down quickly, took a pin out of her hair, and tried to scratch a mark with it on the wall directly in line with the window. To her disgust the hairpin proved to be too frail a tool to have any effect upon the old plaster of the wall. Tossing the pin away, she looked about for some other object with which to mark the spot, but on finding nothing she hurried off toward the scaffold.

"I've got to rush, or the girls 'll be awake and miss me," she told herself as she vaulted the first division wall.

In a surprisingly short time she reached the end of the building. Leaning over the wall, she looked about for the crosspiece on which she

must get a foothold before sliding down to the platform below.

The next instant she gasped and drew back. Surely her eyes were deceiving her.

Cautiously she peeped over the wall again. Yes, there on the platform only a few feet beneath her sat a Mexican with a bucket of paint beside him. Just then loud, coarse laughter sounded from the street, and peering down she saw several workmen applauding one of their number who, poised at the bottom of the scaffold, was dramatizing a love scene. Pulling out a piece of white material from his girdle, he pressed it first to his lips, then to his heart, talking rapidly all the time.

Only two words floated up to her—*señorita* and *amor*. As the actor waved the white material in response to the applause, an expression of consternation came into Jo Ann's eyes. That was her handkerchief! She must have dropped it when she was climbing. The señorita of this silly farce was no other than herself.

Horrified, she drew back out of sight. What must she do now? She dared not climb down

with those awful men there. If her handkerchief had caused such guffawing, what would happen when they saw her?

Alarmed by these thoughts, she fled back toward the chimney. It would offer a little shelter, at least.

"What a mess I've made of things!" she thought as she ran. "Peggy's right about my curiosity getting me in trouble. I'm in it now."

Huddling behind the chimney in an effort to hide from the workmen should they come up on the roof, and to escape the direct rays of the sun, she racked her brain for a way to get out of this predicament without disgracing herself.

"I must not do anything that will hurt Florence or her father," she told herself. "Florence said it would never do for a girl to do anything that 'd attract attention in any way. If I were back home and these were American workmen, I wouldn't have a bit of trouble getting out of this predicament. But down here—! I'd have a time trying to make them understand me. They might think I was crazy or something, but I wouldn't care if it weren't for the Blackwells.

There must be some way out of this embarrassing situation."

At the same time that Jo Ann was puzzling over her problem Peggy was arousing from her siesta. With half-opened eyes, she stretched lazily and looked about the room. Florence was beginning to stir, but where was Jo Ann?

"These lazy, quiet hours are hard on a girl of Jo's temperament," Peggy mused. "I wonder where she is and what she's doing?"

The next moment Florence sat up, yawned two or three times, then asked drowsily, "Where's Jo?"

"That's what I'd like to know. I just woke up and discovered the bird had flown."

"Maybe she got tired waiting for us to wake up and went down to the drugstore for a drink. She ought to be back in a few minutes."

As Florence slipped out of bed she remarked tentatively, "I've planned a shopping tour for this afternoon. I thought you'd be interested in seeing some of the souvenirs and drawnwork in the stores."

"We'd love it," replied Peggy promptly, ris-

ing at once. "I'll hurry and get ready so we'll have a long time to shop. I want to get some of those dainty little handkerchiefs like you sent me for my birthday."

"I'm so glad you like them. The Mexicans really do beautiful handwork, but unless you see something you especially want this afternoon, you'd better wait and get the handkerchiefs directly from the women who make them. They'll be much cheaper that way."

A half-hour later Peggy announced proudly, "I'm all ready—how about you? Don't you think it's time Jo was back?"

"Yes, I do. I don't see what's keeping her. I'll ask Felipe how long she's been gone."

When Florence returned a few minutes later there was a look of bewilderment on her face. "Felipe says he hasn't seen her," she announced.

Peggy's eyes opened wide. "Where do you suppose she can be, then?"

"I'm sure I can't imagine," replied Florence. shaking her head dubiously.

"Do you suppose—she surely wouldn't——"

"What in the world are you talking about?"

broke in Florence, seeing the alarm on Peggy's face.

"I was just wondering if she'd slipped down that back street again. She can't get that mysterious window out of her mind, you know."

"That's so, but, surely, after getting caught yesterday, she wouldn't risk it again. I'm afraid for her to be in the sun so much when she's not used to it."

"Jo doesn't really mean to do anything that isn't right," Peggy defended, "but when she makes up her mind, there's no stopping her."

A little frown appeared on Florence's forehead. "I'm really worried about her going on with this scheme. I don't see how she can carry it out without being in great danger. Isn't there some way you could persuade her to give it up?"

"No. She isn't afraid of anything, and she's the most determined person I've ever seen."

"Let's go into Dad's office and out on his balcony so we can watch for her," suggested Florence a moment later. "She'll surely be back in a few minutes."

"I'm going to give her a piece of my mind,"

fumed Peggy. "She ought to know better than to go off that way. Something might happen to her."

Looking in every direction, the girls were dismayed at seeing no signs of Jo Ann.

"She seems to have disappeared in thin air," said Peggy anxiously. "Something must be wrong. She wouldn't stay away this long."

Almost simultaneously Florence turned her head, listening. "What was that? Didn't you hear someone whistle?"

The next moment a faint but distinct whistling note sounded.

"That's Jo's whistle," exclaimed Peggy. 'But where is she?"

"Here I am!" called a low voice. 'Up on the roof."

"What!" The girls gasped in amazement.

Blankly they stared above them as a red, flushed face, framed with tousled hair, peeped over the edge of the roof.

"What in the world are you doing up there?" called Peggy, finding her tongue.

"I didn't mean to do it," Jo Ann called down, "but I'm caught and can't get down."

"Well, how did you get up there in the first place, and why can't you get down?"

"I climbed that scaffold—it was easy—but while I was up here the workmen came, and now I can't get down. It's hot as the mischief up here in the sun."

CHAPTER VI

JO ANN'S PREDICAMENT

"WHAT ARE YOU going to do?" called Florence. "You'll be sick if you stay up there in the hot sun all the afternoon."

"Well, I don't see anything else to do till the workmen leave," answered Jo Ann. "If you'll get me that parasol, it won't be so bad. There's a nice breeze, but the sun's terrific."

"How in the world do you think we can get the parasol up to you?" asked Peggy. "Do you think we can fly up there with it?"

"Silly! Just get my rope—it's in my trunk—and throw one end up to me and tie the parasol on the other; then I'll pull it up."

"That sounds easy enough," Peggy admitted. "I'll run and get it right away."

She was starting away when Florence put in, "Wait a minute; I'll go with you. Felipe might

be at the door, and we mustn't let him see the rope. It might rouse his curiosity."

"Choke him—chloroform him!" called down Jo Ann crisply. "Anything, only get the parasol, qu-i-ck. I'll be done to a turn if I stay up here much longer without it."

The two girls hurried on to their room. As soon as Peggy had taken the coil of rope from the trunk, she slipped it inside the parasol, saying, "This is the way we brought the rope into the house without Felipe's seeing it, so we can do it again."

As they were entering the hall Felipe stopped them. "Have you found Miss Anita?" he asked, using the Spanish word for Jo Ann's second name, Annette, rather than the longer name of Josephine.

"Yes, she's here," Florence answered quickly, hurrying off.

On reaching the balcony Peggy whistled softly several times, and Jo Ann's head appeared over the ledge.

"Got it? Fine! Pitch it up to me," she called in a loud whisper as Florence put her finger to her lips and motioned toward the office.

Straightening out the rope, Peggy tossed one end of it into the air. Up it sailed, then fell dangling over the balcony rail.

"It's a good thing I had hold of the other end," she laughed. "This grass rope is so stiff, it won't go straight."

"It would if you'd throw it straight," scoffed Jo Ann. "Coil it up again. I believe it 'll be easier to throw that way and pitch it straight up."

Obeying directions, Peggy tried again, only to fail once more. Seeing how far Jo Ann was leaning over the wall in her effort to catch the rope, she exclaimed, "Oh, Jo, don't lean over so far! You make me nervous."

"Well, it looks as if I'll have to hang by my feet to catch anything you throw. If you just knew how hot it was up here!"

"Don't fuss! I'll try again, but this balcony is so narrow that I can't swing my arm. Now, ready? Here goes!"

Up sailed the coil of rope, straight into Jo Ann's outstretched hands.

"Whew! It's a good thing I didn't miss again," gasped Peggy. "That was work, believe me!"

Quickly she fastened the parasol to the lowered end of the rope, and Jo Ann drew it up over the edge of the roof.

Perched on the wall of the roof, high above the city, her feet dangling and the parasol over her head, Jo Ann presented a queer, almost ridiculous appearance, but to Florence and Peggy her position seemed anything but amusing.

So dangerous did it look that Peggy cried out in alarm, "Jo! For goodness' sake get off that wall! Haven't you got into enough trouble for one day?"

"Oh, this would be great," Jo Ann called back, "if the wall weren't so hot. There's a gorgeous view and a delightful breeze—what more could you ask for?" She drifted gaily into one of the popular songs of the day.

"Just picture a penthouse, 'way up in the sky,
With hinges on chimneys, for clouds to go by."

"How can you joke about anything so serious?" asked Florence in a troubled voice. "Oh,

here comes Dad with a patient! We'll have to leave."

"I'll give you the signal as soon as we come back," Peggy called softly.

Since the office opened with full-length, double doors directly onto the balcony, making it almost a part of the room, they hurried toward the door. Before they reached it, however, they met Dr. Blackwell and a tall, dignified man, who, with true Mexican courtesy, bowed politely and begged their pardon for having disturbed them.

As soon as the two girls were inside the bedroom, Florence asked anxiously, "What are we going to do about Jo Ann? I'm afraid she'll be sick if she stays up there much longer in that hot sun."

"I am, too," Peggy replied, "but I don't know what on earth we can do. Isn't there any other possible way except the scaffold that she can get down?"

Florence shook her head.

Every few minutes they stopped talking long enough to peep out to see if the coast were clear.

After what seemed a long time to them, they heard voices in the hall, and to their relief they saw Dr. Blackwell and his patient disappear down the stairs. In a few minutes Felipe followed with the bag.

"Except for Juana we have the house to ourselves now," Florence remarked as they hurried into the office.

On reaching the balcony Peggy gave the signal to Jo Ann.

"I thought you'd never come back," Jo Ann called down softly almost before the sound had died away. "And I'm dying to tell you something."

"You don't have to whisper now," Florence put in. "Dad and Felipe have gone out, and we can stay here and talk to you without fear of interruption."

"Fine! Luck seems to be with me at last," replied Jo Ann. "While I've been up here alone, I've done some serious thinking, and I have a wonderful plan worked out."

"It's about time you did some serious thinking," returned Peggy.

"I'm sorry I got in this mess, but if you can only get me the things I need, I'll be standing down there beside you in a jiffy."

Peggy grinned up at her. "If it's a sheet for a parachute, I won't get it."

"Silly! I want an iron bar and a hammer, or something heavy."

"You're not going to drop them on the workmen, are you?" queried Florence with a half smile.

Jo Ann laughed. "I'm really quite harmless, but while I was climbing up here I noticed that the scaffold was held in an upright position by pegs driven into the wall, and that gave me an idea. Why can't I drive a peg into this wall and fasten the rope to it, and then let myself down to the balcony? Doesn't that sound simple?"

"Why—yes—it does," Peggy admitted slowly. "But where 'll we find the iron bar and something heavy enough to drive it with?"

"There ought to be a hammer around here somewhere," Florence put in quickly. "Come on, and we'll see if we can find it and the iron bar."

"If you can't find an iron bar," called Jo Ann, "maybe I could use an old broom handle, if you'd make a point on one end of it."

"All right," they called as they disappeared into the room.

Entering the kitchen, they found Juana huddled in a chair by the fireplace, asleep.

Slipping by her, Florence took a small hammer out of a cupboard, and handed it to Peggy, saying in a low voice, "Now, if we can find an iron bar, we'll be fixed."

Peggy smiled and whispered, "Why, Florence, this is only a little tack hammer. You couldn't drive anything into a stone wall with this—not in a thousand years."

"I'm sure that's the only one we have," Florence answered in a troubled voice. "You see, since we can't use nails in this house, we seldom have any use for a hammer."

Peggy began staring around. "I'll look and see what I can find."

"Sh!" warned Florence. "Let's not wake Juana if we can help it."

Together they slipped quietly about the room, picking up first one object and then another, only to lay it down again in disgust.

At the very moment that Peggy spied something that would do, Juana opened her eyes and asked in Spanish, "What is it, Florencita? Do you wish me to make you the *merienda?*"

"Why—no, we don't care for anything to eat now," Florence replied slowly. "But we would like to have something to drink. Please go down to the drugstore and get some limeades." She turned to Peggy. "I've ordered limeades. I know Jo 'd like to have a cold drink."

The minute Juana disappeared through the door, Peggy stepped over to the middle section of the fireplace. "Here's the very thing," she said, picking up one of the stones Juana used to set her earthen griddle on when cooking on the fireplace. "And look here," she added excitedly, "Here's a piece of iron—the very thing we need. Now let's hurry. I know Jo's tired waiting."

"How silly of me not to think of these things!" exclaimed Florence. "Juana uses that piece of iron to poke her fire with. Let's hope she doesn't

decide to make *tortillas* any time soon, or she'll miss the stone."

Together they rushed out into the hall, then stopped on catching a glimpse of Felipe at his post just outside the office door.

"What in the world is he doing back?" whispered Peggy as she stopped. "Is Dr. Blackwell in his office, do you suppose?"

Slipping into the dining room, they stared blankly at each other. How could they get the things to Jo Ann now?

"I know what we can do!" exclaimed Florence, running to the china closet. "Put the stone on this plate." She placed a plate on the table. "Now I'll spread a napkin over it; then it 'll look as if you're carrying a plate of sandwiches out on the balcony. I'll hide the piece of iron under my dress, like this."

"Fine!" approved Peggy, her lips curving into a wide smile.

On entering the hall Felipe appeared and explained that *el doctor* had sent him back to take the young ladies for a drive, as he would not need the car for one or two hours.

"I'll ask the girls and let you know," Peggy replied in Spanish, and added, "Call me when Juana brings the limeades."

Peggy hastened onto the balcony and, resting the plate on the rail, whistled twice. As Jo peeped down from above, she called up gaily, her eyes twinkling, "Just see the plate of sandwiches I've brought you. Aren't you hungry?"

"Well—yes, I could enjoy a sandwich," Jo Ann replied, trying to cover her disappointment, "but didn't you get any of the other things I asked for?"

"This is all we could find." Laughing mischievously, Peggy lifted the napkin.

"Oh, Peg, you big tease!" Jo Ann exclaimed. "I might have known you were up to some mischief. Didn't you bring the piece of iron or a broomstick?"

"Here it is," called Florence, slipping the piece of iron out and holding it up.

"That's the very thing—but why all the secrecy?"

"Well, Felipe was at the door, so I thought we'd better use this camouflage."

"I see. I'll let my rope down now; but how in the world are you going to fasten the rock to it, Peggy?"

"I don't know," Peggy replied thoughtfully. "Even if I tie the rope around it a couple of times, it's likely to fall out, and a stone as large as this is heavy enough to kill anyone if it should hit him on the head." She gave a little sudden start. "I know what to do!"

Spreading the napkin on the floor and placing the stone in the exact center, she picked up the opposite corners of the napkin and tied a tight square knot; then tied another one with the other corners. When she had slipped the rope under both securely, she heard Felipe coming in the office door.

She sprang to her feet while Florence ran into the office to keep him from coming onto the balcony.

"I'll take the limeades, Felipe," she told him, taking the tray he was carrying.

Instead of leaving immediately he lingered a moment to ask how long it would be before they would be ready to go for a drive.

For a few seconds she hesitated, then replied, "I think they'll be ready in about half an hour." Jo Ann had seemed so sure she could get down, but maybe—— "If they're not ready by that time, I'll let you know."

As soon as he had left the office Florence hastened back to the balcony. By that time Jo Ann had successfully pulled the stone up to the roof and had lowered the rope for the iron bar.

The moment she had the piece of iron in her hands, she hopped off the low wall and eagerly set to work. Kneeling on the flat surface of the roof, she held the iron bar firmly against the inside of the wall with her left hand and struck it a heavy blow with the stone.

The next instant the iron bar sprang back, knocking the stone out of her hand and striking her foot a glancing blow.

"Oh—my foot!" she cried in muffled tones, hopping around the roof on the other foot.

"I can't stop for a little thing like this," she decided shortly, setting resolutely to work again.

Less confident of her success, she struck the

iron lightly and carefully this time, but without making the slightest impress in the wall. Driving a peg into a stone wall was not the simple thing she had imagined it to be.

"I know it can be done, and I'm going to do it," she told herself determinedly. "If I can only find the seam between the stones, I know I can drive it into the mortar."

After slowly chipping the plaster away over a foot or more in diameter, she found an upright seam. Her arms ached from the unusual strain; her hands and face were covered with grime and plaster dust; and perspiration trickled down her face, streaking it.

Nevertheless, she worked on persistently and at last found the cross-seam. Eagerly placing the bar in position, she began driving it into the mortar between the stones. She struck it very carefully at first, then harder and harder.

"No wonder these houses last forever," she thought. "I never saw anything so hard in my life. This one 'll stand here several centuries more and not show the least signs of wear."

With a last effort she struck the iron several

more blows; then, putting her whole weight on it to test its strength, she heaved a sigh of relief. It did not budge a particle. Fastening the rope securely, she threw the end over the wall. Everything was ready now.

While waiting for Florence and Peggy to return with the implements, she had tied several knots in the rope and made two loops near the upper end, and now, lying flat, she peered over the edge of the wall to see if the loops came in exactly the right place, just over the edge of the roof.

"All set! Here I come!" she called joyously to the girls waiting below.

"Oh, Jo, do be careful! You might fall," urged Florence.

So intent was Jo Ann in getting over the edge of the roof that she paid no attention to Florence's warning. Climbing over a wall two feet or more thick was quite a different proposition from getting over a board fence. She could not back off, and the smooth plaster offered a poor fingerhold while she was catching the loops in the rope.

Finally, sitting on the edge of the wall, she leaned forward and reached for the upper loop. Grasping the loop firmly with one hand and pressing the fingers of her other hand against the plaster, she stretched her foot toward the other loop. But when within an inch or two of it, she suddenly slipped off the wall.

She gasped in terror. Down she dropped. Her arm felt as if it surely would be pulled from its socket as the entire weight of her body jerked on it. Could she hang with one hand? What if the sudden jerk should pull the rope loose from the peg? Desperately she clung to the loop. Then, regaining her balance, she wrapped her legs around the rope. Slowly, carefully she slipped from knot to knot. Four strong young arms caught her before her feet touched the floor of the balcony.

"Oh, Jo! Jo! I thought you'd be killed, sure," cried Florence, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I was so frightened!"

"I was so scared I shut my eyes tight to keep from seeing you killed," added Peggy tremulously. "I hope that taught you a lesson and

you'll be satisfied to stay where you belong after this."

"Girls, look at the spectators!" exclaimed Florence the next moment.

In the street, about thirty feet below, several peons had stopped to watch this unusual performance, while others were running to see what was going on.

After one hasty glance below Jo Ann fled into the office.

"Can't you do anything here without an audience?" she asked a moment later in disgust.

"Not anything like that," replied Florence. "I do hope they leave before Felipe sees them, or he'll have the whole story in a few minutes."

"Anyway, I'm glad I'm down here." Jo Ann drew a sigh of relief. "I hope I never have to stay so long in such a hot place again."

CHAPTER VII

THE PROMENADE

"JO, YOU'RE HURT!" cried Florence. "Look at the blood."

"Oh, that's nothing," she replied. "I just left a little skin up there on the wall when I slipped, but it isn't enough to worry about." She stopped abruptly, then added, "Oh dear! I was in such a hurry to get down, I forgot and left your parasol up on the roof."

"Well, let it stay there," put in Florence quickly. "I'd rather lose the old parasol than have you climb up there again."

"But I am going up there again," announced Jo Ann emphatically. "If I can climb down the rope, there's no reason why I can't climb back up, is there?"

"N-o—I suppose not," admitted Florence hesitatingly. "But Jo—you might get hurt—and——"

"Oh, but I know exactly how to fix that rope now so it won't be so hard to get off the roof next time. I'll pick a time of day when we won't have so many spectators, for your sake, Florence."

Peggy handed Jo Ann a glass of limeade, saying, "Drink this and stop talking about that next time. I'm afraid most of the ice has melted, but it 'll be cool and refreshing, anyway."

Jo Ann reached over for the glass. "Nothing could be more appreciated right now, though I'm 'most too dirty to drink it."

"You are a sight, all right," laughed Peggy. "Soot—blood—dirt—all over your face and arms. We can scarcely tell what color you are. You look more like an Indian in full war paint than anything else."

"For all my war paint, I'm really quite harmless. I've had enough excitement for one day." Jo Ann sipped the cooling drink. "My, this tastes good! Driving that iron into the wall was harder work than I expected. I can easily understand why these houses are so old. Nothing short of an earthquake or a bomb could destroy them."

"Here, I'll take the glass if you've finished," said Florence, placing it on the tray. "I'll send Felipe down to the drugstore with these things, and that 'll give you a chance to slip to your room and get a bath and change your clothes. We'd better not let anyone see you like this."

"Poor Florence!" laughed Jo Ann as Florence carried the tray to the door and gave it to Felipe. "Doesn't she have a time trying to keep me from disgracing the family?"

"You are a problem sometimes," agreed Peggy. "Especially when you get your head set on a thing. You seem to forget everything else then."

"I heard what you said just now," interrupted Florence coming over and putting her arm around Jo Ann as they started for their room. "I know you sometimes think I'm fussy, but there 're some queer customs here that we must recognize. You know the old saying: 'When in Rome do as the Romans do.' "

Having reached their room, Peggy and Florence hastened to bring Jo Ann the necessary

toilet articles for removing all traces of her escapade.

"Here, Jo, you'd better use this cleansing cream first," said Peggy. "You'll never get all that grime off without it. Wait, I'll help you," she added, rubbing some of the cream on her neck.

"Ouch! Be careful! You're rubbing the skin off," cried Jo Ann, dodging.

"Why, I'm not! I'm being just as careful as can be. You're sunburned, that's the trouble—you're red as a beet."

"You're blistered!" added Florence. "Just look at your arms and face now that we've got some of the dirt off! I was afraid of that when you had to stay up there so long. You don't know the penetrating qualities of a tropical sun."

"I believe you look worse with the dirt off than you did with it on," laughed Peggy. "What are we going to do with her, Florence?"

Florence shook her head dubiously. "I don't know. If Daddy sees her like this we'll have to explain what's happened, and I don't want to do that."

"And I don't want you to, either," Jo Ann put in quickly. "I want to surprise him by solving the mystery of that window. He doesn't seem to think there's anything strange about it—he didn't even look at it."

"You must promise to be very careful, whatever you do," Florence warned.

"Didn't I just tell you, Jo, that sometimes you're quite a problem?" added Peggy teasingly.

"You just wait till I've had my bath," Jo Ann replied as she started out of the room. "When I finish dressing, I'll look all right."

When she returned a little later and preened herself triumphantly before them, Peggy burst into a peal of laughter.

"She looks exactly as if she'd stuck her head in the flour barrel and the flour had stuck in spots, doesn't she?" she remarked to Florence.

"Well, her skin does look queer—a little like parchment or canvas," reluctantly admitted the more polite Florence.

Jo Ann grimaced. "I like that—after all my efforts."

"Let me fix your face," offered Peggy. "I

promise to touch your face as lightly as a butterfly touches a flower."

"Listen to the poet!" scoffed Jo Ann.

"Poet and artist," added Peggy, smiling widely. "Watch how skillfully this artist works on her canvas now."

Lightly brushing most of the powder off Jo Ann's face, she applied a generous amount of vanishing cream, then dusted it with just the right amount of powder so that enough of the red in her cheeks would show through to look natural.

When she had finished, she waved her powder puff with a flourish. "Behold the transformation from Indian to a member of the white race!"

"You really don't look bad at all now, Jo Ann," smiled Florence. "If you stay out of the bright light, I don't believe anyone—not even Daddy—will notice how sunburned you are."

"Is that the best you can say—to tell me I won't look bad if I stay in the dark?" put in Jo Ann. "How 're you going to manage to keep me in the dark? If I stay in my room and don't go

to dinner tonight, your father 'll be sure to dose me with pills and tonics."

"I'll use candles on the dinner table tonight—I often do—and in their soft light your sunburn won't be noticeable."

To Jo Ann's vast relief Dr. Blackwell did not make any comment about her complexion at dinner, even though Peggy teasingly hinted that she had taken unusual pains with her toilet this evening.

Unconscious of anything amiss, Dr. Blackwell asked pleasantly, "Are you girls going over to the Plaza tonight to join in the promenade?"

"Yes, I can hardly wait," replied Peggy. "Florence told us about the promenade yesterday while we were driving around the Plaza."

Dr. Blackwell exchanged glances with Florence, his eyes twinkling.

"I understand," he chuckled, "that if you want to catch a suitor, all you have to do is pick out the young man you prefer, then throw him a rose as you pass. You can deliver your message by the color of the rose you use."

"That 'd be lots of fun," replied Peggy laugh-

ingly. "Where 'll I get the rose, and what color shall I use?"

"Why, P-e-gg-y!" cried Jo Ann in consternation. "You wouldn't really do a thing like that —would you?"

"If I should, I'd only be doing in Mexico as the Mexicans do—and that's more than you've learned to do yet," she finished, smiling teasingly at Jo Ann.

Jo Ann subsided instantly. A little more, and Dr. Blackwell might see through Peggy's veiled remarks and begin asking questions about what she had been doing.

To her relief Peggy turned to Florence, saying, "Tell me some more about the why and wherefore of the rose-throwing custom"—her eyes sparkled—"so I can introduce it in the States for Jo's benefit."

Smilingly Florence explained that this was a very old custom but was seldom used now. "The Spanish girls and their *caballeros* have very few opportunities of meeting each other. When they pass on the promenade—you remember I told

you how the girls all walk in one direction and the men in the other—they take advantage of this chance to say a few words or deliver a message."

"If you've finished dinner, let's sit out on the balcony a while with Dad before we go down to the Plaza. We can listen to the music and watch the crowds from there."

The Plaza, which only a short time before had been almost deserted, began to present a festive appearance now. Clusters of electric lights shone, making it bright as day; lines of cars passed back and forth; and crowds thronged the broad promenade.

To Jo Ann it seemed as if the balcony were a box at the theater, and from it she was watching a play being enacted on an immense stage. The beautiful, exquisitely dressed girls, who arm in arm were slowly and gracefully strolling along on the outside of the promenade, were the actresses of the play; the *caballeros,* handsome and well groomed, passing on the inside and never losing an opportunity to bow and smile at the

señoritas as they passed, were the actors; as for the background, there were the trees and shrubbery, and the benches filled with chaperons. All the time, the music, soft and rhythmical, was floating up to her—"the orchestra" she told herself, though she knew it was the notes of the wind instruments of the band that she was hearing.

Peggy broke into her thoughts just then with, "Can't we go down there now? I've never seen anything quite like this before. I love it!"

"It is fascinating," put in Jo Ann, "but we can really see better from here."

"Oh, I know, but you miss half the fun up here," Peggy replied quickly. "I want to promenade, too—be a part of the gaiety."

"All right, we'll go now," said Florence. "Do you mind, Daddy, if we leave you?" she asked solicitously as she stooped to kiss his forehead.

"Of course not, my Florencita," he replied, pinching her cheek affectionately. "Run along now and have a good time. Don't forget, Miss Peggy, what I told you about catching a suitor," he teased.

"All right, Doctor, I won't," she laughed,

"and if I do anything to disgrace Florence, it 'll be all your fault."

"I'll take the consequences," he returned lightly.

The three girls ran to their room a moment to add the finishing touches to their toilet, and for once Peggy was ready as soon as Jo Ann. All excitement, she caught Florence and Jo Ann by the arms to hurry them along.

"O-h, Peg—don't! My arm's sore!" cried Jo Ann, holding the injured arm away from her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Peggy sympathetically. "Your camouflage is so good I'd forgotten about your blisters. I'll remember hereafter, and we'll walk one on each side of you, so no one 'll bump into you and hurt you again."

They crossed the street and joined the gay promenade around the Plaza.

While Peggy was enjoying looking at the crowds, Jo Ann kept glancing back across the street at the front of the building in which the Blackwells had their apartment. Since their entrance was on the side street she had never before had an opportunity to examine the front of the

house closely. The lower floor, she saw, was occupied mostly by different kinds of stores.

Shortly after passing opposite the drugstore beneath Dr. Blackwell's office, she noticed a broad-arched doorway about halfway down the block. As she gazed through this doorway and into the brightly lighted space beyond, she suddenly gave a little gasp of surprise.

"Isn't that a patio I see through that big doorway across the street, Florence?" she asked.

"Yes; there's a small patio there."

"Then that explains it," Jo Ann went on eagerly. "This afternoon while I was up on the roof I noticed a queer, oblong walled-in place right in the center of the building. I didn't pay much attention to it at the time—I was so worried about getting off the roof, but I believe now that this wall must 've been around the opening for that patio. I'm wondering if that patio wasn't at one time a part of your house."

Florence's eyes opened in surprise. "What makes you think that?"

"Why, because there wasn't a division wall

between that oblong opening and your part of the house. If it were originally one big house with many rooms, that would explain the reason for the huge kitchen and the immense fireplace."

"That sounds reasonable enough, but why would they have built such a large house—a *casa grande,* as they say in Spanish?"

"I don't know, but that's what it's been—*casa grande.*"

"Oh, there you go again, talking about that house," put in Peggy. "Let's forget it and enjoy the promenade."

"All right, I won't say another word about it now, but as soon as we get back to the house, I'm going to look around and see if I can find something that will prove that I'm right."

"You're hopeless, Jo—the idea of thinking about an old house when there's all this lovely music to listen to, and all these beautiful girls with their Paris gowns, and the handsome young men to see!"

After they had strolled around the square for over an hour, Jo Ann remarked a little impa-

tiently, "Don't you think we've walked long enough? I think it's time we were going back to the house."

"Oh, don't let's go back yet!" Peggy replied quickly. "Let's stay till the concert's over. That house 'll still be standing there—patio and all."

"That won't be long," put in Florence. "The band 'll probably only play another piece or two. You can't do any exploring about the house, anyway, Jo, till Daddy goes to his room," she added.

So it was that they did not start homeward until the band had played the last number and the crowds were leaving.

After reaching the house the girls talked for a few moments with Dr. Blackwell, then went on to their room. It was not long afterward that Jo Ann's keen ears caught the clanging sound of metal as Dr. Blackwell bolted the outer door. She waited impatiently a little longer, then slipped out into the hall, and silently stood at the head of the stairway, trying to figure out how these rooms had been connected with the patio and the other part of the house.

"I know that patio is in about the center of

the house," she thought. "Then this wall opposite me would be in a direct line with the patio."

Since she could not see distinctly in the dim rays of the night light, she turned on a brighter one, and tilting it upward, threw its rays directly on the wall opposite.

To her disappointment she could see nothing but the plain surface of the plastered wall.

"This hall must 've been connected in some way with that patio," she told herself. "There's bound to be something somewhere to show how it was connected."

Tilting the light first at one angle and then another, she gazed at the wall intently, searching for some sign of a former opening.

All at once she caught a glimpse of the dim, shadowy outlines of a broad arch.

Tiptoeing to the bedroom door, she called softly, "Girls, come here quickly! I've found it —I knew I was right!"

Quickly she led Peggy and Florence to the spot in which she had been standing, and again tilting the light, pointed to the wall.

"Don't you see the outlines of an arch over there?" she asked, as she threw the rays of the light back and forth across the wall.

"Your imagination's running away with you, Jo," scoffed Peggy. "I can't see a thing but a blank wall."

"I do see something—a faint shadow," put in Florence slowly. "Why, Jo! I do believe you're right! There was an arch there."

"Sure I'm right," declared Jo Ann triumphantly. "This arch is the end of a wide hall that connected this back hall with the patio and the rest of the house. I believe your father's office was the dining room. Can't you just imagine a long banquet table down the center of that huge room and——"

"But why would they have such a huge dining room?" Florence asked quickly. "What could the house have been used for?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to find out." Jo Ann's chin took on a determined tilt. "Maybe I can find something in Señor Rodriguez's books that will help me to solve the problem. I believe that mysterious window has something

important to do with it—at least, that's the way it looks to me."

"Sh! Not so loud, Jo; you'll wake Daddy."

Quietly the three girls slipped back to their room to talk far into the night about the unexplained mysteries of the old house.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SEÑOR'S LIBRARY

IN SPITE OF all the ointment and salve Jo Ann had applied to her face, neck, and arms, she spent a restless night. By morning some of the soreness had disappeared, but her appearance was not much improved. Before venturing out of her room she carefully put on some make-up and viewed the effect critically in the mirror.

"I may be able to cover up my sunburn from the servants, but not from Dr. Blackwell," she told herself. "His trained eyes 'll be sure to penetrate my mask in the daylight. Here's hoping he doesn't eat lunch with us today. Florence says he's nearly always late."

To her inward consternation, no sooner had she stepped into the hall than she saw Dr. Blackwell coming toward her. Immediately she slowed her steps. "If he comes any closer, I'm sunk—even if this hall is dark."

The next moment Dr. Blackwell called a cheerful "Good morning" to her and disappeared into his office.

Jo Ann smiled in relief as she thought whimsically, "A guilty conscience is certainly a bad companion."

As on the previous morning, she and Peggy went with Florence to market, and, as before, she made only one purchase. This time it was a roll of very slender but strong hand-twisted rope.

"Now what are you going to do with that heavy cord?" Peggy promptly asked.

"Use it to conceal that big rope I left hanging from the roof."

"Use a string to conceal a heavy rope?" Peggy asked in amazement. "Ah, the magician!" she added mockingly.

"Don't be silly, Peg. There's nothing mysterious about it. I've got to do something with that big rope before anyone sees it."

Peggy shook her head dubiously. "Well, I hope you know what you're talking about—I

don't. Here comes Florence—she must be ready to leave."

"And the faithful watchdog following, as usual. You know, I believe he's getting suspicious. Several times I've noticed him looking at me with the queerest expression."

"You know Florence said he never misses a thing. He's probably wondering what you've done to your face."

On reaching home the girls found breakfast waiting, but Jo Ann could scarcely eat in her eagerness to get to the balcony before Felipe cleaned the office.

While Florence went to the kitchen to discuss menus with Juana, Jo Ann and Peggy slipped to the balcony. The rope, they found, was hanging just as they had left it the day before, and while not very conspicuous against the dull gray color of the wall, Jo Ann felt that it ought to be put completely out of sight. As she studied the wall, she unwound the roll of heavy cord she had bought earlier in the morning.

"Look down the street, Peg," she ordered. "Do you see anybody?"

"No, it seems practically deserted right now," Peggy replied. "Why?"

"I have to climb part way up that rope again, and I don't want any spectators," she explained while fastening the cord to the end of the rope. "If you see anybody coming, let me know."

"All right."

As soon as she began climbing up the rope, Jo Ann realized how sore her muscles were from the unusual strain she had put upon them the day before. Would she be able to make it to the top? she wondered. "I've got to do it," she told herself the next moment, tightening her lips into a firm line.

Inch by inch she pulled herself up, slipping the cord through each of the loops in the rope as she went. On reaching the roof she found it extremely difficult to steady herself while passing the cord through the highest loops, but as she was determined to pull the rope up as high as possible, she kept on trying. Having succeeded at last in getting it through the loop at the roof's edge, she took the end of the cord be-

tween her teeth and began to slip slowly down the rope.

When she was a little over halfway, Peggy suddenly cried, "Hurry, Jo! Here come some people! I believe they see you—they're looking this way. Hurry!"

Instinctively Jo Ann turned her head to see the people. As she did so, her elbow scraped the rough plastered wall. A sharp pain instantly shot through her arm, and slightly loosening her hold on the rope, she slipped rapidly to the floor.

"How silly of me to do that!" she grumbled, examining her arm. Her sleeve, she saw, was torn, and blood was running from a place where the skin had been scraped off. "It looks as if I'll have to be packed in cotton wool to keep from getting hurt—but this is not finishing my work, and Felipe may come out here any minute."

Hurriedly she searched for an inconspicuous place to fasten the end of the cord. Finally noticing the hand-wrought hinge on the door, she decided that this offered a good hiding place.

She began at once to wind the cord into a

small tight ball, and as she pulled the end of the cord, the heavy rope attached to it started to crawl snakelike up the wall. When at last the rope hung in several long loops at the edge of the roof, she fastened the cord to the door hinge and jammed the ball into the crack above.

"That 'll be all right as long as the door isn't closed," she said, "and it seldom is—at least, it hasn't been closed since we've been here. It doesn't show much from here, and it can't be seen from the inside of the office."

Leaning against the balcony rail, she and Peggy surveyed the wall approvingly. The string was almost invisible, and the loops of rope at the top were scarcely noticeable, so high were they above the street.

"No one would ever see that unless they were looking for it," agreed Peggy. "But how 're you going to get it down? Didn't you say you were going back up there?"

"Sure I am, but that's simple enough," Jo Ann replied. "When I loosen the string the rope is heavy enough to drop down of its own accord."

Hearing a sudden noise behind them just then, they started guiltily. There stood Felipe in the doorway. Immediately Jo Ann wondered how long he had been there and how much he had seen.

"I'm glad he couldn't understand what we were talking about," she said to Peggy. "He's the perfect watchdog, all right."

Smiling now as they realized how nearly they had come to giving themselves away, they strolled nonchalantly around the balcony and entered the room from the farther side.

"You want to clean the room?" Jo Ann asked, pointing to the broom and mop.

Felipe grinned and nodded his head, *"Sí,* señorita." While not understanding the exact words, he had understood their meaning.

Could Peggy and Jo Ann have seen him a few minutes later, they would have been very much amused and not a little worried. The minute they were out of sight he stepped out on the balcony and stood gazing up and down the street, then turned and searched the balcony, but in vain.

"Muy curioso, las Americanas [Very curious, these Americans]," he muttered, shaking his head.

After the injured arm had been bandaged with Peggy's assistance, the girls wandered to the back of the house in search of Florence. Finding her in the kitchen in the middle of baking a cake, they stayed to help her.

To Jo Ann's relief Dr. Blackwell did not appear at lunch, but when he came in an hour later, she happened to be passing through the hall. On seeing her Dr. Blackwell stopped to call to her that he had met Señor Rodriguez and that the Señor had sent a special invitation to her and the other girls to visit his library that afternoon. "Does that conflict with your plans?" he asked.

"Not at all," Jo Ann answered quickly, forgetting all about her sunburned face. "I've wanted to meet Señor Rodriguez and talk to him ever since you told me about his library. Maybe I can find out more about your house and the old church this afternoon."

The moment Dr. Blackwell left she remembered her previous anxiety about his seeing her

sunburned face. "I forgot all about my face," she smiled to herself. "Well, I'm going to Señor Rodriguez's this afternoon, sunburn or no sunburn. Surely in such a fine library as his I can get some information that 'll help me find out more about this house, especially about that mysterious window."

When, after the siesta, the girls began getting ready to go to Señor Rodriguez's, Peggy applied cream and powder to Jo Ann's face with the most painstaking care.

"I believe I'll start a beauty shop," she declared as she stood back and gazed approvingly at Jo Ann's face. "You actually look pretty now."

Jo Ann grinned. "Only a real artist could have performed that miracle. I don't care much about the pretty part, though. All I want is to pass muster under Dr. Blackwell's inspection."

"You will—don't worry."

Dressed in fresh dainty frocks, the three girls were waiting on the balcony when Dr. Blackwell drove up in the car to take them to Señor Rodriguez's.

Since Florence had told her about the Señor's beautiful patio, Jo Ann gazed eagerly about when they entered the cool, spacious corridor of his house. The mosaic tiles of the floor seemed to her to reflect all the bright colors of the flowers in the beds beyond and of the potted plants clustered about the stone pillars which supported the graceful arches of the court.

The servant immediately ushered them into the *sala* or drawing room, a room of immense size and well-proportioned lines. Several large mirrors in heavy, gold-leaf frames, she noted, filled much of the wall space and gave the room the appearance of even greater size. The full-length double windows next caught and held her attention, curtained as they were with exquisite hand-made lace, which contrasted strangely with the iron bars.

The next moment their host and his wife entered: Señora Rodriguez, short, plump, and motherly, and the Señor, tall and distinguished-looking.

At first glance Jo Ann's hopes sank. How could she ask this austere, dignified gentleman

all of the questions which had been uppermost in her mind? Was the visit she had looked forward to with so much pleasure going to be in vain? Since the introductions were in Spanish, she felt a little ill at ease—all the more so when she saw Señora Rodriguez kiss Florence, first on one cheek, then on the other, and pat her on the back.

"If she kisses and pats me that enthusiastically on my sunburned skin, I'll be sure to flinch," she told herself.

The next moment Señor Rodriguez turned to her and, smiling, asked in broken English, "Are you de young lady who speak de Spanish?"

"Oh, no, señor, I can't speak Spanish," she answered timidly.

"*El doctor* say you have study de Spanish," he insisted.

"*Sí,* señor, I studied Spanish two years," she replied, "but I speak very little."

"Ah, my dear young lady," he said pleasantly, "if you do not try, how can you learn? You must speak to me in de Spanish. You see, my Ingles ver' bad. I am too old to learn de Ingles now."

"Oh, no, señor," quickly replied Jo Ann. "You speak very good English. Much better English than I do Spanish."

"*Gracias,* señorita," he replied, smiling. "But how can I know?—you have not speak de Spanish. My son, Joaquin, speak de Ingles perfect-ly. I send him to college in de States. You know—Harvard—I t'ink you call it?" he asked, pronouncing it Arvard, since the h is always silent in Spanish.

"Oh, yes, indeed! I know Harvard. It is a college of very high standing. Does he like it there?"

"*Sí,* he likes it ver' much. Dis year he finis, den he come home, and I take him in de office wid me. If he vas here now he could help you. De doctor say you are interes' in de history of my city."

"*Sí,* señor, I am," she answered quickly. "I want to find out all I can about that old church across the street from Dr. Blackwell's house. Both it and the house are so old, I feel sure there must be some very interesting things connected with them."

"I t'ink you are right, and I shall be ver' happy to assist you," he offered. "We feel proud to t'ink you are interes' in our city. Did you not want some books?"

"I'd like to see some that contain old records and accounts of the early history of the city, about the time that church was built."

"If you come dis way, please," he said, bowing, "we shall see what we can find."

By this time Jo Ann had completely forgotten the feeling of doubt and awe she had felt at first. The Señor was a very gracious host and had not laughed at her strange idea. Eagerly she followed him across the hall to a room only slightly smaller than the drawing room. Bookshelves lined most of the wall space, and a long table and several chairs were the only furniture.

"It's decidedly a man's room," she thought: "restful—quiet—just the kind of a room in which to study."

Soon she and the Señor were oblivious of everything. They had something in common—books—even if they were in Spanish. In a short time they were chatting pleasantly, un-

consciously using a mixture of English and Spanish. Together they searched old books and records, laying aside several for her to take home so that she might study them at her leisure.

In the meantime, Señora Rodriguez had taken the other guests to the patio to see her flowers, and after about half an hour she came to the library door and called softly to her husband, "Papa, you must not keep the young lady here so long—she will get tired." Addressing Jo Ann she asked, "Perhaps you like to see my flowers, eh?"

"I'd love to," replied Jo Ann, unconscious of having spoken in Spanish.

"We have the *merienda* first, then I show you the flowers," she said, leading Jo Ann to where the girls and Dr. Blackwell were seated in the cool pleasant court beside the flower garden.

"What could be more beautiful and restful?" Jo Ann thought as she gazed across the patio with its stuccoed wall overhung with flowering vines, its fountain tossing sparkling sprays of water into the sunshine, and its roses, jasmine,

and orange blossoms filling the air with their mingled fragrance.

By this time the servants had noiselessly brought in the refreshments and placed them on an exquisitely inlaid tea table. While Señora Rodriguez passed rich little cakes and sweet buns with squares of *jalea,* a stiff jelly, the servants served thick black coffee and delicious, rich chocolate beaten to a froth.

"Jo, isn't this simply gorgeous!" sighed Peggy happily. "I've never enjoyed anything more in my life."

Jo Ann nodded an emphatic assent, adding, "And I've never seen such a beautiful patio before."

After Señora Rodriguez had proudly shown Jo Ann her flowers, Dr. Blackwell announced that he had several calls yet to make and that they would have to leave. Silently the girls rose to go. With true Mexican courtesy Señora Rodriguez loaded them down with flowers and kissed each girl on both cheeks, but to Jo Ann's relief there was no patting on the back.

Laden with books and flowers, they drove

home through the soft, tropical twilight, Peggy and Jo Ann completely charmed by the dignity and friendliness of the Rodriguez family.

"I've never met finer people," declared Jo Ann enthusiastically to Florence on their way home. "I admit I was a little afraid of the Señor at first. He was so tall and dignified, but I forgot all about that when I'd talked to him a few minutes. It's easy to understand why he's such a good lawyer, isn't it?"

"Yes, he's a very remarkable man," agreed Florence. "I was sure you would enjoy meeting him and his wife. By the way, Jo, did you get any information this afternoon that will help you?"

"Yes, I found out several things," she replied. "From the old records we found that the city was founded in 1560. The Señor said that the old Mexican towns were always built around the church. That and the Plaza formed the hub around which the city grew. If that is the case, then it is possible that the church was built even earlier than 1560, before the founding of the city."

"You mean that the church is three—no, four hundred years old!" exclaimed Peggy.

"Yes, and since Florence's house is between it and the Plaza, it was built at the same time or before. It seems to be the very center of the hub. I'm more convinced than ever that its history is in some way connected with that of the church."

After Dr. Blackwell had gone on his calls and Florence and Peggy were chatting together, Jo Ann studied the books she had brought home. Page after page she read, slowly and with much difficulty, about the Aztecs and the coming of Cortez; of the growth of the Spanish territory until it reached from ocean to ocean, and from Panama to Vancouver Island on the north; about Hidalgo, Morelos, and General Iturbide; of rebellions and civil wars. The wars might explain the reason for these thick walls, she mused. They always used the church as a place of refuge. Perhaps this house was used for the same purpose.

To her disappointment, however, she could find no reference to either the house or the church in the books. She threw down the books

at last, exclaiming, "It 'll take me ages to get much help from these! It's worse than hunting a needle in a haystack. In Spanish they go all around the bush before coming to the point, and while it's beautiful to read, it's difficult to find what you want."

"Calm yourself, my dear—calm yourself," said the astonished Peggy. "You've been talking for days about these books, and now that you have them, you go all up in the air. What a changeable person you are!"

"I'm not changeable. I'm glad I have the books, and I'm going to study them—very carefully, too, but I can't stand this suspense any longer. I want to find out something definite about this house *right now*. I know exactly how to get the information I want, and I'm going to get it—maybe tomorrow. I'm almost tempted to do it this very night."

"What are you talking about?" cried Florence, alarmed by the determined expression on Jo Ann's face. "What wild thing are you planning to do?"

CHAPTER IX

THE SEALED DOOR

THE STILLNESS of the night was suddenly shattered as a booming noise vibrated through the silent old house. There it was again. Boom! Boom! It echoed and re-echoed through the great hall and high-ceilinged rooms.

"What was that?" whispered Peggy as she and Jo Ann sprang up in the darkness, wide awake in an instant.

"I don't know," Jo Ann whispered back. "It sounded like shooting. Do you suppose someone's starting a revolution? You never know what to expect next down here."

"I knew you shouldn't have read those old histories last night, Jo," murmured Florence drowsily, with a hint of amusement in her voice. "You seem to have war on the brain."

"Well, what in the world was that noise, then?" retorted Jo Ann. "I know perfectly well

I did hear something that sounded like a gun or a——"

Before she could finish her sentence the booming noise sounded again in rapid succession.

"Now! I suppose I'm imagining things, am I?" she scoffed.

Florence broke into a peal of laughter as she rose and began hastily putting on her robe and slippers. "I'm really surprised, Jo, that you could be fooled by anything about this house—you've studied it so thoroughly," she added over her shoulder as she ran out of the room.

"Now what do you know about that!" exclaimed Peggy with a quizzical expression on her face. "I fail to see the joke, don't you?"

"Well—I believe—I'm beginning to see it," replied Jo Ann slowly. "That was only someone knocking on the door downstairs, but I can't see why Florence had to answer it. I don't believe Dr. Blackwell would expect her to go down there alone—in the middle of the night—to answer the door."

"No, I'm sure he wouldn't," agreed Peggy, "but why did she rush off like that, then?"

A few moments later Florence burst into the room, still smiling. "Well, I've stopped the revolution," she announced, her eyes twinkling. "I assure you everything is quiet and peaceful, and you won't be disturbed again. Go back to sleep. You're perfectly safe now."

"I know I sounded silly, but I was half asleep, and it startled me," Jo Ann explained apologetically. "I know now it was someone knocking on the door, but why did you have to answer it?"

"I suppose it did look funny, the way I rushed out there alone," Florence replied, "but I knew it was only someone coming for Daddy. I always go downstairs with him to bolt the door after he leaves."

"To bolt the door!" repeated Peggy. "Can't he use a key? I never heard of the whole family having to get up in the middle of the night to escort someone to the door."

"Well, I'd much rather bolt the door after him," Florence laughed, "than go along to carry the key for him."

"How ridiculous!" Peggy retorted. "People usually carry their own keys, don't they?"

"Yes, that's true—but this is an unusual house, you must remember. You've never seen this key, have you?"

Peggy and Jo Ann shook their heads.

"Well, it's solid brass, about that long"—she held up her hands eight inches apart—"and weighs a pound or more. In olden days they took the *mozo* along just to carry the key—when it was necessary to carry it. We've found that the key makes a better parlor ornament than anything else."

"What's a bozo—or *mozo,* or whatever you call it?" asked Peggy.

"That's what they call a manservant," explained Florence.

Peggy then turned to Jo Ann and remarked teasingly, "The key—weren't you hunting for a mysterious key? There you are! Your wish has been granted."

Disregarding Peggy's remarks, Jo Ann asked eagerly, "Florence, where's that key? I want to see it."

"It 'll keep till morning," Florence returned, snuggling into bed. "Come on—it's 'most four

o'clock, but we can get a nice little nap before time to get up."

"Tell me where the key is, and I'll get it," persisted Jo Ann. "I couldn't go to sleep for thinking about it—not that it 'll help me though, as Peggy suggested. That's not the kind of key I'm looking for."

"I don't know exactly where it is," replied Florence. "I'll have to hunt for it, but if you're that anxious to see it, we'll get it."

With flashlights blinking, the three pajama-clad figures crept across the hall and into the parlor, a room that was seldom used. After searching among several other old relics in a cabinet, Florence finally unearthed the huge key, tarnished and black from disuse.

"Here you are," she said, handing it to Jo Ann. "You can look at it the rest of the night if you want to, but I'm going to bed. Come on, put it under your pillow or anywhere you wish."

She led the way back to their room, and she and Peggy quickly crawled into bed. But Jo Ann sat under the light, turning the key over

and over in her hand, musing. "What a key! Who ever heard of a key so large you needed a servant to carry it—but how typical of the time when this house was built. Everything—the walls, the windows, the doors—practically impenetrable. What a place of refuge in times of war and strife!"

"Turn out that light," growled Peggy, startling Jo Ann out of her reverie. "Can't you dream as well in the dark? We want to go to sleep, if you don't."

"Oh, I'm sorry—I didn't mean to disturb you," Jo Ann answered, and, turning out the light, crawled into bed.

It seemed to Jo Ann that she had scarcely closed her eyes before there was a knock on the door, and she heard Florence talking to someone. "What is it this time?" she thought drowsily. "Such a night—just one thing after another."

She turned over and dozed off again, but again a voice broke into her slumbers: "Jo, come on."

"Why couldn't they leave her alone—or was she dreaming?"

"It's time to get up, Jo," the voice urged. "Hurry! Juana's not coming today, and we've got to do the cooking."

Forcing one eye open, she saw the room filled with sunlight, and Florence and Peggy already almost dressed.

"O-oh, I'm so sleepy!" she mumbled between yawns. "I'll get up in a minute."

"That's what you get for keeping us awake half the night," scolded Peggy. "Now hurry up. We've got to get breakfast."

"What d'you say?" she asked lazily.

"Come on, Florence, let's pull her out," put in Peggy. "We'll get even with her for last night."

Without another word Peggy made a grab for Jo Ann's feet. But Jo Ann was wide awake in an instant. Like a flash she reached out, and catching Peggy around the neck, pulled her down on the bed beside her. Laughing and shrieking, the tussle continued while Florence dropped in a chair, convulsed with laughter. Over and over the two rolled, first this way, then

that, till they finally landed on the floor, panting for breath.

"Well—you're awake—now!" gasped Peggy.

"Did I dream it or did I hear you say something about Juana not coming today?" Jo Ann asked when she could get her breath.

"I'm sorry to inform you that you were not dreaming," replied Florence. "No, she's not coming, and if we eat today we'll have to cook. Her husband's sister's child died, and she went over there till after the funeral. Juana's so good I hate to say anything when she misses a day now and then. The Mexicans have such large families, someone is always dying. That's why black is almost a uniform with the peon women. They're always in mourning for someone."

"Gracious! I'd hate to wear black all the time," shuddered Peggy.

"Well, this won't get breakfast or clean up the house," said Jo Ann, dressing rapidly. "Come on, let's get busy. This is just the opportunity I've been waiting for."

"Why the sudden ambition?" inquired Peggy quizzically. "It's strange I have no recollection

of your having demonstrated your talent for housework before."

"Oh, I don't mind cooking," returned Jo Ann. "But that's not what I'm talking about. I've been trying to get in that kitchen without Juana there so I could poke around in all the corners to my heart's content."

"Oh, I see!" laughed Peggy. "While we work, you search out the mysteries of——"

"Girls! Girls! Whatever shall I do with you?" put in Florence, laughing. "Which would you rather do?" she added as the trio trooped gaily to the kitchen. "Go to market or have breakfast first? Since Daddy's already had his breakfast, it makes no difference which we do."

"It's all the same to me," replied Peggy. "I'm not the least bit hungry, and I'd rather enjoy the walk."

"Someone has to stay here to look after the house and answer the door," Florence went on. "Since you girls can't very well do the marketing, I'll go with you, and we'll leave Felipe here. This will be one morning you won't have to be bothered with him, Jo."

"Wait a minute," cut in Jo Ann. "I have a better plan than that. Let's have breakfast right now; then, while you and Felipe go to market, Peg and I'll stay here and wash the dishes."

"I can't let you do that!" exclaimed Florence in dismay. "And, anyway, what 'd you do if someone came to see Dad?"

"Oh, I'd say *en un momento* [in a minute] and sit them down in the office till you got back," Jo Ann answered lightly. "You see, what I really want is to get rid of the watchdog for a little while, and that seems to be the only way of doing it."

"Well—under—one condition," said Florence hesitantly. "If you'll promise not to do anything daring or dangerous in any way, then I'll let you stay here."

"I'll do my best to keep her straight," promised Peggy.

"You do have a time with me, don't you?" laughed Jo Ann. "I'll promise to be good this time."

As soon as breakfast was over, Florence started off to market, with the faithful Felipe

trailing along behind. At last Peggy and Jo Ann had the house to themselves. They stacked and carried the dishes to the kitchen, and then Jo Ann quickly placed her stack on the table and walked to the door. From there she started across the room in front of the huge fireplace.

"One—two—three," she counted, pacing the distance to the wall across the room, "four—five." Then, turning, she measured the distance back again.

"I guess that's right," she mumbled to herself.

"What in the world are you doing now?" asked Peggy disgustedly from across the room. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Don't bother me. Seventeen—eighteen——"

"Josephine Annette Cutrer, are you going to help with these dishes?" insisted Peggy.

There was no response from Jo Ann. By that time she had gone out the door and was pacing the length of the hall.

"Peg! Oh, Peg! Come here quick!" she called excitedly in another moment. "I knew I was on the right track. Look!" Again she paced the

length of the hall from the door, back. "You see," she explained, "there's about eight feet difference in the distance on this side of the wall and that in the kitchen."

"What do you mean?" asked Peggy in surprise. "It's bound to be the same."

"But it isn't. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Now, if the wall measures less on this side, wouldn't you figure there was some reason for it?"

"Why—yes, I suppose so."

"Well, then! What would you call a space eight feet deep—and with a window in it?"

Peggy stared, wide-eyed. "Why, Jo! You mean—there's a room back there?"

"Exactly! It couldn't be anything else," Jo Ann replied, taking the shade off the light. "Here, hold this light at this angle so it 'll shine on the middle of this wall."

"Is that right?" asked Peggy, trying to do as she was told.

"No, shine it over a little to your left." The next moment Jo Ann exclaimed in disgust, "Oh,

gee! It's so dark in this corner, even that doesn't do much good. Wish I had a light 'way back here."

"Wait a minute. I'll get my flashlight," called Peggy, running quickly to her room.

"Now, is that better?" she asked a moment later.

"Yes, but—here, hand me the flashlight." Jo Ann reached over for the flashlight. "Now you hold the other one. Two lights ought to be better than one," she added, gazing intently at the wall from first one angle then another. "Peg, am I seeing things, or is there a shadow across the wall?" she asked a few minutes later, holding the light close.

Peggy shook her head. "I can't see a thing."

"Put that light down and come here! Now, look—right here!" Jo Ann pointed, running her hand across the wall. "And over here! I can feel a sort of dent in the wall. Don't you see it?"

"Oh—I—believe—I do," Peggy answered slowly, then, "Yes, I do see it now. I'm sure I do!"

"There used to be a narrow door right here!" cried Jo Ann excitedly. "I knew it! I knew it! I told you the key to the mystery lay behind that window." Grabbing Peggy, she danced her hilariously around the hall.

CHAPTER X

THROUGH THE MYSTERIOUS WINDOW

THEIR DANCE came suddenly to an end when Peggy exclaimed, "Jo, stop! Hush! There's someone coming up the stairs."

"Oh, do you suppose it's Florence? We haven't washed a dish."

"And whose fault is it, I wonder?" Peggy retorted teasingly.

In a few more moments a decrepit, half-blind old man, led by a small, wizened-faced boy, appeared at the head of the stairs.

Jo Ann gave a long sigh. "They must be patients for Dr. Blackwell. I'll have my troubles now trying to talk to them."

"Can't you ask them what they want?"

"I'll try. Let's see. Ah—*que queres* [what do you want]?" she finally managed in Spanish.

The old man mumbled a reply, but Jo Ann could not understand a single word.

"Do you want *el doctor?*" she asked again.

Once more the old man mumbled an unintelligible reply.

Jo Ann turned to Peggy. "I can't make out a thing he says. What 'd we better do? Take them into the office and let them wait? Florence always tries to persuade the patients to wait for her father."

"I don't know what to say," replied Peggy doubtfully. "I've never seen such pitiful-looking specimens of humanity in my life. They look like charity cases to me, but maybe you'd better try to hold them."

"Well, I'll try—if I can make them understand."

With renewed efforts Jo Ann struggled to make herself understood, using a mixture of Spanish and English and gesturing vigorously with her hands.

Not the slightest change came over the expressionless faces of the man and boy.

In despair Jo Ann turned again to Peggy. "They're hopeless," she declared. "I give up. Let's just leave them standing here."

As soon as she had stopped talking, the boy took the old man by the hand and led him down the stairs and into the street.

"I'm sorry I couldn't hold them," sighed Jo Ann, dropping down on the steps to rest after her strenuous efforts.

"Come on," urged Peggy. "Let's finish the dishes before Florence gets back."

"All right. We'll have to hurry."

Returning to the kitchen, they attacked the dishes energetically, though talking over the discovery of the hidden room all the time.

"While you put things away," offered Jo Ann, "I'll sweep, and everything 'll be straight in a jiffy."

When they had almost finished, Florence appeared in the doorway.

"How smart you've been!" she praised, glancing around the kitchen approvingly. "You didn't have time to get into mischief, did you?"

"We've had time to make a wonderful discovery!" exclaimed Jo Ann quickly. "Guess what we've found!"

"What—the family skeleton?"

Ignoring Florence's sarcastic remark, Jo Ann went on rapidly, "We've found the door to a mysterious room at the end of the hall!"

"A door! A room!" Florence gasped. "What 're you talking about?"

With her words tumbling over each other in her excitement, Jo Ann began explaining the details of their discovery.

"It seems almost unbelievable that there's a hidden room in this house," Florence exclaimed, wide-eyed as she wheeled about to examine the shadow of the doorway by the flashlight.

"There's a door there, all right—I can see it," she agreed finally. "But what—why do you imagine anyone sealed it up?"

Peggy shook her head dubiously and replied, "I haven't the slightest idea."

"I'm not sure about that either," put in Jo Ann, "but I do know that the mysterious window opens into this hidden room."

"I believe you're right," Peggy agreed quickly. "I believe it does."

"I do, too," added Florence. "But what do you suppose is inside this hidden room? That *is* a mystery!"

"I'll be able to explain that before long," declared Jo Ann. "I'm going to look through that window this very day."

"Oh, Jo, do be careful," warned Florence. "I'm afraid you'll be——"

Before Florence could finish her sentence, Peggy broke in with, "If you go, Jo, I'm going up on the roof with you."

"All right—that suits me. If things work out right, I'm going during the siesta hour. I slipped past the watchdog once—surely I can slip into the office without getting caught——" She stopped suddenly. "Mentioning the office reminds me that two patients came while you were gone, Florence. I did my best to hold them, but I didn't succeed—I couldn't make them understand a word. They looked stupid to me." She went on to give a vivid description of their appearance.

Before she had finished, Florence began to smile.

"What's the joke?" Jo Ann demanded.

"I'm glad you didn't hold them—they weren't patients at all," Florence replied, still smiling. "That was just a poor old beggar who comes by every few days."

Peggy burst into laughter. "That makes Jo's efforts to hold them all the funnier. I wish you could have seen her—she talked with her hands as much as she did with her mouth."

"She's a true Mexican, then," laughed Florence. "That's the way they do. But this won't get us anything to eat. We're going to have your fried chicken today. How does that suit you, Peg?"

Peggy nodded approval. "Fine! Who says I don't rate high in this household?"

"Don't get so conceited," teased Florence. "I just thought that 'd be the easiest thing to fix."

Joking and laughing over their work, the morning passed quickly.

As soon as lunch was over and the girls had gone to their room for the siesta hour, Jo Ann pulled a pair of knickers from her trunk and began putting them on. "It 'll be much easier to

climb in these, and I won't be nearly as conspicuous," she remarked to the girls.

"Since I'm not going to do as much climbing as you are, I won't bother about changing," put in Peggy.

"Peep out the door, Florence," Jo Ann ordered a moment later, "and see where Felipe is. If he's awake, get him out of the way. We can't wait any longer—we'll have to hurry, or we can't get through before the city wakes from its siesta."

"W-ell," she agreed hesitantly, walking over to the door. The next moment she called over her shoulder, "He's awake. I'll have to put him to work at something." She disappeared into the hall.

"I'm so excited I can scarcely wait," Jo Ann went on as she finished dressing. "Let's see—I'll need my flashlight. By the time I get in that narrow opening, there won't be much space left for the light to filter through."

"Have you the rope?" asked Peggy. "Do you suppose it 'll take you as long to fasten it as it did before? Gee, I hate to think of that sun!"

"You forget the parasol's still up there. I've got everything I need. Are you ready?"

Just then Florence returned and announced that she had sent Felipe to sweep the kitchen.

Thus assured that Felipe was out of the way, the girls slipped quickly to the balcony.

Unfastening the string from the hinge where they had left it, the rope dropped within reach. With the flashlight fastened to the back of her belt, Jo Ann climbed, hand over hand, up to the roof.

As soon as she had helped Peggy over the ledge and slipped the rope off the iron bar, the two girls hurried on across the roof. They did not want to stay in the sun longer than necessary or climb back to the balcony before a crowd of spectators.

"Isn't this view gorgeous!" exclaimed Peggy, running first to one side of the building and then to the other, to gaze down on the city lying quietly below.

"Yes," nodded Jo Ann, busily making the necessary preparations for her hazardous adventure. "Bring me the parasol a minute, will you?"

"All right, but what in the world are you going to do with a parasol?"

"Wait a minute and you'll see. I've got to fasten this rope to the wall by poking it through this little hole—left here for a drain I suppose. You'll notice the roof slopes down this way a little."

"Yes, I see, but how 'll that fasten it?"

"Well, I'll tie this stick"—Jo Ann held up a piece of wood—"to the end of the rope, then push it through the hole." Suiting her words to action, she began poking it with the parasol. "Climb up on the wall and tell me when it comes through, will you?"

"All right," said Peggy, scrambling up on the wall. "It's through!" she called a moment later.

"Now—you see the stick hangs across the opening, making sort of an anchor for the rope," Jo Ann explained. "Isn't it lucky for me that hole was in the right place? I'd surely hate to drive another iron bar in this wall. It's terrible!"

"Wh-ew!" Peggy gasped as she looked down over the wall. "It's so high on this side of the

house, you'd break every bone in your body if you fell on these cobblestones!"

"Cut out the dramatics, Peg," scolded Jo Ann. "I'll be careful. Tell me if the loop on the end of the rope comes just a little below the window," she added, testing the knots in the rope.

"Yes, it's all right."

"Fine! Everything's ready, then—ready for the great adventure—the solving of the mystery." The next moment Jo Ann was over the edge of the wall.

Peggy watched, breathless, till Jo Ann disappeared; then, throwing herself across the wall and oblivious of the intense heat of the stones, she watched anxiously as Jo Ann descended the sheer side of the building.

With the utmost caution Jo Ann slowly made her way down the rope. Carefully she lowered herself from knot to knot. A false move might be dangerous. "It's lots more dangerous than I realized," she told herself.

On a level with the window she stopped. Then, while standing in the loop on the end of the rope and clinging tightly to it with one hand,

she tried to get a fingerhold in the opening. Unfortunately, on a wall that was over two feet thick and perfectly smooth, it was not possible; moreover, it was exceedingly difficult for her, while clinging to a rope high in the air, to crawl into an opening only two feet high and four feet across. Holding tightly to the rope with both hands, she finally swung her feet into the window, but could get no further. In this half-sitting position her head and shoulders came above the top of the opening.

"To think I'm in the window and yet can't look inside!" she exclaimed aloud.

"What's the matter?" called Peggy anxiously.

"Oh, I'm just too big to get into this hole!" she answered disgustedly.

"Well, come back up here, then. Give up this foolishness while you're all in one piece."

"What! Give up when I'm this near? I should say not!" Jo Ann's voice was emphatic.

She began wriggling and twisting more determinedly than ever, and at last, after repeated efforts, she managed to stretch herself across the broad ledge, with her feet dangling in the air.

After resting a moment, she worked herself around till she faced the mysterious room.

Immediately she felt cold air against her face and caught whiffs of a dank, musty odor.

Her heartbeats quickened as she realized how near she was to solving the mystery. What secret lay concealed within these walls?

Unfastening the flashlight from her belt, she threw its rays around in the darkness. Blank walls, stained with age, loomed before her. As nearly as she could judge, this tiny, high-ceilinged room was only about six by ten feet, and the window in which she lay, about fifteen feet from the floor.

The room appeared perfectly bare. Not an object of any sort was to be seen. For what had it been used? Since it had at one time been connected with the rest of the house, there was bound to have been some reason for its construction.

"Peggy and Florence 'll have the laugh on me if there's nothing in this room and I've had all this work for nothing," she thought. "There ought to be something to show what it was used for."

Again casting the rays of her light over every inch of the room, she stopped suddenly on noticing the curious appearance of the floor. One half of it was the dull gray color of the cement, and the other half, black.

Taking the string from her belt, she fastened it securely to the flashlight and carefully lowered it down the wall into the room. As the rays shone directly on the floor, she gasped in surprise. The black strip was an open shaft!

"Why is it there?" she asked herself. "Where does it lead?"

Peggy called down just then, "Jo! Oh, Jo! Come on. It's time to go, and I'm roasting."

Jo Ann kicked her feet in response. Why would Peggy interrupt her at such a time?

By twisting and turning the string she was able to throw the light back and forth along the shaft. Carefully she examined it. There was some object at one end of it, she was sure, but in the dim light she could not distinguish what it was.

Again Peggy's impatient voice floated down to her.

"Oh dear, there's Peg calling again," she

groaned. "I suppose I'll have to go now, but I'm coming back—with more light and more rope."

Just as she started to wind up the string, it suddenly slipped through her fingers. Down fell the flashlight to the floor, then rolled over and disappeared down the black hole.

As its rays shone on the sides of the shaft, Jo Ann caught sight of something which made her gasp in surprise. In her excitement she almost fell off the ledge in her attempt to get a better look at this object.

"Why! This is a bigger mystery than I ever dreamed!" she ejaculated aloud.

CHAPTER XI

THE HASTILY PLANNED MERIENDA

THRILLED WITH DELIGHT over what she had discovered, Jo Ann could scarcely wait to share the secret with Peggy and Florence. Things were working out to her entire satisfaction at last.

With the utmost caution she eased herself around on the stone ledge. Nothing must happen now to prevent the further investigation of this mysterious room.

As soon as Jo Ann's head appeared outside the opening, Peggy called eagerly from the roof, "Jo, did you find anything?"

"Why, of course!" she called back. "Isn't that what I came for?"

"What is it?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!"

"Jo, don't be so mean. Was there a room?"

"I'll tell you later." Lying flat on her stomach, Jo Ann reached for the rope.

Getting out of the opening, she found, was much more simple than getting into it. With little difficulty she pulled herself out of the window and slowly climbed to the roof.

"What 'd you discover? Tell me, Jo," pleaded Peggy. "Was it worth the trouble?"

"I should say so. I'll tell you all about it when we get off the roof. Let's hurry down before the people begin to stir in the streets."

"All right. I'm about roasted."

"I've found a real mystery this time," Jo Ann added as she pulled the rope up over the edge of the roof.

"If you say any more, I'll die of curiosity before we get off this roof."

"And I'll leave you right here, too," Jo Ann returned lightly. "Before that happens, though, push the rope in that hole a little to loosen it so I can catch hold of the stick with the parasol."

Obediently Peggy dropped to her knees and began pushing the rope while Jo Ann reached for the other end with the hooked handle of the parasol. After working for several minutes she managed to get hold of the rope and slip the

stick out of the knot at the end. Peggy easily pulled the rope through the hole then, and off they started across the roof.

"I'll have this rope fixed back on the bar in a jiffy now; then we can get off this hot roof," Jo Ann remarked.

As soon as she had tied the rope on the bar and tested the knot she added, "You first, Peg. You've been in the sun longer than I have. Let me help you. It's a little hard getting over the wall."

"What do you think I am—a baby?" asked Peggy with injured dignity. "I can do it if you can."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," laughed Jo Ann. "When you get down I'll lower the parasol to you. Be sure to keep a sharp lookout for Dr. Blackwell and Felipe. I don't dare to let them see me in these knickers—they'd know I'd been up to something unusual. I'm more anxious than ever now to keep our adventures a secret till we solve the whole mystery."

Peggy nodded assent as she leaned over the wall and looked down. The next moment she

exclaimed in surprise, "I wonder where Florence is! I thought she'd surely be waiting for us on the balcony, didn't you?"

"Yes. She's probably worried frantic—we've been gone so long. Be sure to be as quiet as you can now till you find out whether anyone's in the office."

Quietly Peggy slipped over the edge of the wall and down the rope to the balcony. Tiptoeing to the door, she peeped into the office. To her consternation there was Dr. Blackwell dozing in his chair by the desk.

After waving an excited warning to Jo Ann she hesitated a moment, debating whether to stay on the balcony or to slip by Dr. Blackwell and see if Felipe were asleep in his chair by the door.

"If Felipe's still asleep, I'll signal Jo to come on," she told herself.

Softly she crept into the office. When she had almost reached the hall door, Dr. Blackwell suddenly gave a little start and looked around.

"Why, Miss Peggy—I thought you were asleep!" he exclaimed.

"Well—I—I didn't want to sleep this after-

noon," she stammered. "I'm sorry I disturbed you. Do go on and finish your nap."

As she hastened out of the room she saw Felipe turn and look at her in surprise.

"He's wondering where I've been—how I got into the office without his seeing me," she thought. "Poor Jo's in bad luck again, with both Dr. Blackwell and Felipe awake. I knew we were staying up there too long. I wonder how on earth Florence and I'll ever manage to get both the doctor and Felipe away from the office long enough to give her a chance to get to her room."

As she was crossing the hall she met Florence coming from the rear.

The moment they got inside their room Florence asked anxiously, "Where's Jo—is she all right? I've been worried to death over you girls."

"She's caught up on the roof again. Your father's in the office, and she's scared to come down for fear he'll ask her some embarrassing questions. Those knickers 'd give her away. If I hadn't had on a dress, I'd have been caught."

Florence nodded understandingly. "I know he'd be shocked if he saw Jo in knickers. Girls

never wear knickers in the city. He'd know she'd been up to something."

"What 'll we do? We can't let her stay up there all afternoon. Can't you think of some plan to get your father and Felipe out of the way a few minutes?"

Florence wrinkled her brows in a thoughtful frown. "I don't know what to say. Let's see. The only thing I can think of is to make some coffee and invite Dad to our *merienda* in the dining room."

"That's fine, but what about Felipe?"

"We'll have to decide that later. Come on; we'll fix the coffee, and by the time it's ready maybe we can think of something for him to do."

Hastily they prepared coffee and dainty sandwiches, then went to the office for Dr. Blackwell, who promptly accepted the invitation to the *merienda.*

"We'll join you in the dining room in a minute," Florence told him.

As soon as Dr. Blackwell had left the office and Florence had sent Felipe to the drugstore for some ice cream, Peggy grasped this oppor-

tunity to call Jo Ann. She flew to the balcony and whistled softly. The moment Jo Ann's head appeared over the wall she called, "The coast's clear. You'll have to hurry, though."

Jo Ann needed no urging to get off the roof. She literally dropped to the balcony, drew the rope up and fastened the cord in its accustomed place, then ran to her room.

In an amazingly short time she emerged looking cool and fresh in a soft green dress. Meeting Felipe in the hall with the ice cream, she offered to carry it to the dining room.

When they were almost through their lunch Felipe announced that a patient was waiting to see *el doctor.*

The moment Dr. Blackwell was out of hearing Peggy burst out, "Jo, tell us quickly, before anything else happens, what you found in that room."

"I found plenty. There's a bigger mystery than we ever dreamed of."

"Well, tell us—what is it?" insisted Peggy.

"Yes, do hurry, Jo," added Florence. "I can't wait another instant."

"Well, I'll start at the beginning," Jo Ann re-

plied. "When I finally got in that window—I had to lie on my stomach to do it—all I could see was a small dark room. There was the odor of decaying wood or something—it smelled old and stale."

"Oh, do you s'pose they could 've used that room as a sort of dungeon or cell and left people in there to die?" gasped Peggy, wide-eyed.

"I hardly think so—there wasn't a thing to suggest that. It was perfectly bare. I thought for a while you girls had the laugh on me this time. I hated to admit I'd gone on a wild-goose chase. I was just about ready to turn around and climb back to the roof when I decided to look again, and then——" She paused dramatically.

Both girls waited breathlessly, then Peggy ejaculated, "Go on! Don't keep us in suspense any longer."

"Then I threw the light over the floor again and noticed one half of it was black while the other half was gray. Now what do you suppose that black strip was?"

Peggy and Florence shook their heads. "How do we know?" said Peggy. "Go on."

"I couldn't tell either, in the dim light. Then

I tied my flashlight on a string and lowered it down as far as possible. That black strip was—a —black—*hole!*"

"I don't see anything wonderful about that," scoffed Peggy.

"Why do you suppose they'd have a hole like that in a house?" put in Florence.

"That's just what I was wondering," said Jo Ann. "When the string slipped out of my hand and the light fell bumping down the hole, I——"

"How could it bump down a hole?" broke in Peggy skeptically.

"Well, it did—and that's what I got so excited about." She paused again.

"Cut out the dramatics," Peggy ordered impatiently.

"Now, young lady, if you don't like the way I'm telling this, I'll stop right here." Jo Ann smiled teasingly.

"Oh, do go on," begged Florence.

"Well, then—as the light bumped over and over, I saw remnants of a crude ladder or steps of some sort. There seemed to be some rough

heavy poles—something on the order of that scaffold the workmen used—but it looked as if there were steps between the poles. I couldn't see very well."

"But how could there be pieces of wood left in there if this house is as old as you said it was?" demanded Peggy. "It 'd all be decayed long ago."

"Not in this climate," put in Florence quickly. "Are the doors of the house decayed? You see the air in this country is so dry that things do not deteriorate as they do in the ozone belt."

"Why should they have a ladder in such a place?" queried Peggy.

"Use your head, Peg," advised Jo Ann. "You know the door to the hidden room opens right at the end of this dark hall." She gestured toward the hall. "Think how convenient it 'd have been to have a secret passage leading from there!"

"Oh, I see what you mean!" Peggy exclaimed.

"But what would they want a secret passage for?" asked Florence.

"At the time this house was built," replied Jo Ann, "there were rebellions and wars going on

much of the time, and that secret passage may have been the means of escape, or it may have led to a hiding place. I can imagine several reasons why it would have been convenient."

"Where do you suppose it goes?" Peggy asked curiously.

"I have a very good idea about that right now, but I'll tell you later. I'm going down there and find out." Jo Ann tilted her chin at a determined angle.

CHAPTER XII

FLORENCE'S SURPRISE

"FELIPE certainly did look funny when you marched in with this big package in your arms," laughed Peggy as she and Jo Ann entered their room. "He was probably wondering why you hadn't taken him along to carry it for you."

"So I noticed. His eyes were big as saucers, and he seemed to be trying to bore through the wrapping paper." Jo Ann smiled complacently as she removed the paper from the package and took out a coil of rope twice as long as the one she had slipped into the house inside the parasol a few days before. "It seems strange, doesn't it, to have to carry paper to the market with you to get your package wrapped, as I did this morning."

Peggy nodded. "It's a good thing you had that paper in your trunk. How are you going to fix

that rope now that you have it—make a rope ladder?"

"No; I'm going to make loops in it as I did in the other piece. This hand-twisted *ixtle* rope—that's the Mexican name for it—is so wiry that I'd have a time trying to make a ladder out of it. Florence said the Aztecs made this same kind of rope before the Spanish came to this country. It's so stiff we'll have no trouble getting our feet into the loops, and it 'll be almost as easy to climb as a ladder."

With deft fingers Jo Ann began tying the loops in the rough fiber rope.

"It seems to me you'll have to make lots of loops so you can climb 'way down in that black hole—or shaft, as you call it," Peggy observed.

"I know that. I'll have to figure out the depth of the shaft so I'll be sure to have enough rope to reach that far."

When Florence came into the room a few minutes later, Jo Ann turned to her and asked, "Do you know how high the first floor of this building is?"

Florence shook her head. "I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well, I'll have to figure it out some way. I can't afford to get 'way down there in that shaft and find out I haven't enough rope."

"Why don't you talk about what *we're* going to do instead of *I* all the time?" put in Peggy. "If you think you're the only one who's going to explore that shaft, you're badly mistaken—I'm going too."

Jo Ann half smiled and answered slowly, "Well—all right—if you aren't afraid."

"Afraid! Why should I be afraid, any more than you? I can go anywhere you can. I don't go around hunting for trouble the way you do, but I don't lose my head when I get in a tight place. You'll probably need me, at any rate, if you're going down in that shaft."

"That's true," Jo Ann admitted.

"Just to prove how helpful I can be," went on Peggy, "I'll tell you how to find out the height of the first floor. Drop enough rope from the balcony to touch the street, then pull your rope up and measure it."

"Good headwork," approved Jo Ann, to Peggy's delight. "I—no, we—will do that the first chance we have. Since you were so kind as to solve that problem, I'll give you a much harder one to figure out. It's this—how and to what are we going to fasten this rope so we can go down into the shaft? There's nothing in that room to which we could fasten it."

Peggy silently considered this puzzle for a few minutes, then said slowly, "I can't answer that right now, but I'll keep on thinking till I do."

Florence, who had been unusually quiet up to now, spoke up encouragingly, "Jo's always managed so far to do what seemed impossible, and she'll be sure to find a way to fasten the rope, if you don't."

"I hope your prophecy comes true," Jo Ann said, smiling over at Florence. "I believe I'd better go out and take a look at the back of the house before it gets dark and see if I can't figure out a way right now. I'm ready to stop, anyway. This rough rope has almost blistered my hands. Don't you girls want to go with me?"

"I do for one," Peggy replied quickly. "I'm

tired of the house—and it's lovely outside now. There's a gorgeous sunset." She pointed out the window to the rose and gold clouds floating across the azure sky.

"Let's all go," agreed Florence.

With one accord the three girls hastened down the stairs.

"Let's go on out to the Plaza and watch the sunset a few minutes before we go back of the house," Peggy urged when they reached the door.

The girls nodded assent, and arm in arm they started walking slowly around the square, drinking in the beauty of the slow tropical sunset as they went.

"I've never seen a more beautiful sight," declared Jo Ann as she gazed at the towers of the ancient cathedral and the rugged mountains beyond, outlined against the western sky. "It looks as if golden flames were bursting from each peak and touching everything with gold."

Just as she had finished speaking, a dark-robed figure moved from the arched gateway of the church and came slowly toward them.

"Isn't that the *padre* coming from the church, Florence?" Jo Ann asked. Nothing, no matter how beautiful, could keep her mind long from the one thing which had become an obsession with her. "Maybe he can give us some information about the church. Let's ask him."

"It won't hurt to try, of course," replied Florence, "but I hardly think it 'll do any good."

They crossed the street and met the *padre* on the corner.

"How do you do, Padre Ignacio," said Florence in Spanish. "May we speak with you a moment?"

"May the Mother of Jesus bless you," the *padre* replied. As he passed her house several times a day, he knew Florence, although she did not belong to his church. "It will give me the greatest of pleasure to be of assistance to the señoritas."

"Ask him if he knows anything about the early history of the church," begged Jo Ann. "You know my Spanish isn't anything to brag about."

After introducing Peggy and Jo Ann, Florence carefully explained that these American

girls were very much interested in his church on account of its great age, the type of architecture, and its connection with the early history of the city. "This señorita," she said, placing her hand on Jo Ann's arm, "is studying the history of our city and is eager to get all the information she can on the subject, and we would appreciate it very much if you could tell us anything that will be of assistance in making this study."

The *padre* listened attentively until Florence had finished, then shook his head and replied, "I am very sorry, my dear young ladies, that I cannot help you, but I have been in this part of the country only a few years—only since the change in government, when the priests and teachers of God were expelled. Ah, *Madre de Dios,* but that was bad, very bad!" he added sorrowfully, shaking his head. "It pains me greatly not to be able to help you but, though I feel very much honored that you are interested in my humble church, I know nothing about its early history."

"We thank you very much, Padre," replied Florence. "We shall come over to visit your church again. A *muy buenas tardes* [a very good

afternoon]," she added, and Peggy and Jo Ann echoed, *"buenas tardes."*

"Buenas tardes, señoritas." With a bow the *padre* continued on his way.

"Too bad we couldn't get any help from him," Jo Ann remarked after he had passed out of hearing distance. "It certainly is hard to find out anything about that old church. Let's go now and look at the back of the house and try to figure out a way to fasten the rope."

They crossed the street and stood gazing intently at the back wall of the house.

"It looks as if we'll have to tie the rope to the iron bars of that window in the back room," declared Jo Ann finally. "You see the top of it is almost on a level with that narrow opening that we've been calling the mysterious window."

"But how 're you going to get the rope from that back window to the opening?" queried Florence.

"Oh, Jo thinks she's a fly or a scorpion and can crawl across the wall," cut in Peggy.

Ignoring Peggy's remark, Jo Ann continued,

"We'll fasten the rope securely to the iron bars in that window; then I'll drop down to the opening as I did before. I believe by sticking my fingers in the crevices of the rough plaster I can pull myself across the wall near enough to the window to catch hold of the rope."

"It's mighty high up there," said Florence, "and that looks like a difficult thing to do."

"Those bars are absolutely the only thing to which it can be fastened," replied Jo Ann. "By standing in the loop on the end of the rope it won't be as difficult as it looks."

"Come on; it's almost dark, and we can't stand here on the street any longer," said Florence. "Dad may be waiting for us to come to dinner, and he'll be worried."

"Listen! Why can't we explore the mysterious shaft tonight?" Jo Ann exclaimed suddenly. "It won't take long to tie the rest of the loops and test the knots. Everything else is ready—the flashlights and all."

"Tonight!" gasped Florence, whether in consternation or surprise, Jo Ann could not decide.

"Yes, tonight. There's a full moon—it 'll be as bright as day out, and I'm afraid if we wait something 'll happen to spoil the whole thing. I'd just die if I didn't get to carry this out."

"But why at night?" asked Peggy as they climbed the stairs.

"Well, why not?" returned Jo Ann. "It won't be any darker in that shaft at night than in the daytime. You couldn't see your hand before your face down there right in the middle of the day. We'll carry our flashlights. I got some more batteries and an extra globe for the one I dropped. I thought we might need an extra one —that is, if that flashlight isn't smashed all to pieces."

"I wish I could go too," said Florence tentatively.

Jo Ann and Peggy exchanged swift glances, but neither offered one word of encouragement to Florence.

Surprised at this request and not knowing how to answer it, Jo Ann and Peggy were silent as they sat on the balcony waiting the call to dinner. Lights like fireflies flashed here and there as

darkness settled over the city, and a slight breeze, heavy with the scent of orange blossoms, stirred the trees across the way.

Florence finally broke the silence. "Can't I go with you and Peggy, Jo Ann? I'd be careful."

Jo Ann and Peggy were thankful at that moment for the darkness. Florence must not see the look of dismay on their faces. How could they refuse to let her go with them when it was her house?—and yet both felt that they dared not.

"Peggy, ask her to let me go," Florence begged when Jo Ann did not answer.

"Florence—you see," began Jo Ann slowly, "it 'll be rather dangerous, and your father 'd never forgive us if anything should happen to you."

"We've had lots more experience climbing than you have," added Peggy.

"I know, but I can climb that rope," Florence put in coaxingly. "I've tried it."

"Why, Florence, you shouldn't have tried it alone!" exclaimed Jo Ann. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I didn't want you to know till I found out

whether I could do it. I've wanted so much to do the things you girls do, but I knew it wouldn't be safe to go down in that shaft without some practice climbing a rope. I feel sure I can climb down there now."

"I can't picture you as a tomboy climbing on top of the house," put in Peggy, smiling.

"And here I've been thinking all the time that you were terribly shocked at our behavior," added Jo Ann.

Florence shook her head. "Not shocked—just envious. I've been practicing going up and down that rope every morning before you girls were out of bed. I can do it easily now. You know last summer at camp I got so I could climb mountains as well as the rest of the girls, after I'd had a little experience."

"You're a plucky little rascal," praised Jo Ann. "If she wants to go with us that badly, we'll have to let her go, won't we, Peggy?"

Peggy nodded an emphatic assent.

CHAPTER XIII

INTO THE UNKNOWN

AFTER THEY HAD GONE to their room that night, the girls continued to talk over their plans for exploring the mysterious black shaft.

"If we're going to get the benefit of the full moon, we'll have to go down into the shaft in the next two or three nights, so we might as well go down tomorrow night," Jo Ann said earnestly. "What do you say to our going tomorrow night?"

Florence and Peggy exchanged excited glances, then replied in unison, "All right."

The next morning they set to work early to get everything ready for their great adventure.

So it was that just as the bells in the cathedral tower finished chiming the midnight hour, three lithe, knicker-clad figures crept one by one up on the roof and over near the chimney.

"We'll have to wait a little while," said Jo Ann, low-voiced. "The moon isn't up far enough

yet for it to throw much light on the rear of the house. I can't get the other coil of rope out of that back window without more light." She placed her gloves, flashlight, and rope on the roof beside her, the other girls following her example.

"I'm glad we have to wait," Florence remarked. "It's lovely up here in the moonlight. Wouldn't this be a wonderful place for a roof garden? We could come up here and enjoy it every——"

"Listen!" broke in Peggy with her finger to her lips. "I hear music!"

Obediently Florence and Jo Ann stopped talking to listen.

"A *caballero* serenading his lady love," Florence explained in reply to Peggy's questioning look.

The next moment Peggy began swaying to the rhythm of the music like a graceful willow tree in the breeze; then catching Florence by the arm, she danced her lightly across the roof.

When they neared Jo Ann again, she called to them softly, "Better not make so much noise!"

"No one 'd ever dream of looking up here," Peggy murmured over her shoulder, dancing away and not stopping till the music ended.

The spell being broken then, the three girls clambered to the top of the wall and sat there for several minutes looking down on the city below. In the brilliant tropical moonlight the winding gray paths and dark shadowy trees and shrubbery of the Plaza were silhouetted against the white-walled buildings beyond. High above all, like a sentinel on guard over the sleeping city, rose the bell tower of the cathedral.

They were still gazing at this enchanting, etching-like picture when the chimes rang out again.

Jo Ann gave a little start. "I didn't realize we'd been sitting here so long. This moonlight's cast a spell over me—I'd almost forgotten what we came up here for. I'm going over now to see if there's enough light shining on that back wall for me to get the rope that we fastened to the iron bars of the window."

She sprang down lightly and crossed the roof. One glance showed her that she still had a few

minutes to wait before the rays of the moon would light the back window. As she stood looking out over the rear wall of the church, her gaze traveled on past the adobe huts toward the river.

"The moonlight has worked magic," she thought in surprise. "It has changed that ugly district into a thing of beauty; those dirty adobe huts look white and shining, and that muddy river, silvery and peaceful. If only something could transform the lives of the people who live there the same way! I wish there were something I could do to help them."

She shook herself slightly. "It won't do any good to stand here dreaming about it," she said aloud, then turned and called softly to the girls, "Come on. It's light enough now for me to see to get that rope."

While she had been talking she had fastened her flashlight to her belt and slipped on a pair of heavy gloves to protect her hands from the scratchy fiber rope. That done, she lowered herself over the wall and slipped down till her feet reached the loop on the end; then holding the

rope firmly under one arm, she dug her fingers into the rough plaster and moved slowly across the wall. When she had almost reached the window, her hands slipped. Like the pendulum of a huge clock, she swung back and forth, clinging tightly to the rope. Simultaneously there was the sting of fire across her shoulder and arm. Glancing around, she saw that her shirt was torn and blood was oozing from her shoulder.

"What's a little thing like that?" she thought. "There's no time to bother with it now." Maybe if she'd take off her gloves, she could reach the window. Jerking them off, she tried again and again to get a fingerhold in the wall to pull herself across, but without success.

"It's not as simple as I thought," she told herself, wondering what to do next.

Hearing a soft whistle just then, she glanced up where Peggy and Florence were watching from the roof. Peggy was gesturing excitedly as if she were trying to tell her what to do. What could she mean?

The next moment she felt the end of the heavy cord dangling in her face, and immediately she

understood. She grasped the cord and fastened it securely to the rope to which she was clinging; then with Peggy and Florence pulling on the cord from the roof, she found it easy to move across the wall. There was no danger of slipping now. Having braced herself with one foot between the iron bars of the window, she unwound the coil of rope which she had fastened there from the inside earlier in the evening. After testing it to see that the end was securely fastened to the bars, she whistled softly to the girls. At once the cord slackened, and she swung slowly back with the end of the long, knotted rope in her hand.

On reaching the narrow window she pitched the rope through, then wriggled herself onto the ledge. After turning on her stomach she had both hands free to unfasten her flashlight.

Anxiously then she waited for Florence to descend. By having her come between them she and Peggy felt they could look after her better. But now, to her amazement, she saw that Florence was fully capable of looking after herself.

She was climbing down slowly and cautiously, but not timidly.

Since the narrow window was very small and would hold only one, Jo Ann knew she must hurry to get out of it. After a hasty examination of the room below, she lowered herself to the floor, careful to avoid falling into the open shaft which extended completely across one end.

The moment she touched the floor she flashed the light upward so as to help Florence and Peggy in their descent. In a few more moments they were standing safely beside her.

"What a strange place!" Peggy said, then added quickly in a whisper, "I'll wake Dr. Blackwell at this rate."

"No; talk as loud as you like," replied Jo Ann. "These walls are so thick I believe you could yell down here without his hearing you."

The girls stared at Jo Ann in amazement. It seemed incredible—uncanny—that they could be within a few feet of home and Dr. Blackwell, and yet he could not hear them.

With the aid of their flashlights they exam-

ined the room from top to bottom, only to find that except for the rough outlines of the sealed doorway, it was bare and uninteresting. Half fearfully, then, they stared down into the shaft. In the surrounding darkness the old ladder looked white and ghostlike.

"Why do you suppose they sealed up that door instead of closing up this hole?" queried Peggy curiously.

"Because it was much easier to close up the door," replied Jo Ann. "It 'd be hard to conceal as large an opening as this in a cement floor. I have an idea that the door was sealed up in a hurry to prevent the discovery of this secret passage. Let's see where it leads. Shine your lights over this way so I can see," she ordered, climbing over the edge of the floor.

Slowly she made her way down the rope into the shaft. Now and then she stopped to kick off a loose step or a jagged splinter from the old ladder lest it should injure Florence and Peggy, who would follow in a moment.

Suddenly she gave a little shriek. There to one side of the shaft yawned the mouth of a low,

tunnel-like opening. "O-oh, hurry, girls!" she cried excitedly.

"What's the matter?" called Peggy in alarm. "Are you hurt? Be there in a minute," she added as she started down the rope.

"I'm not hurt, but I've found something important," Jo Ann called back.

In a surprisingly short time both Peggy and Florence had dropped down to the bottom of the shaft beside Jo Ann. With eyes straining to penetrate the darkness, the girls peered into the tunnel.

"Come on, let's go inside," urged Jo Ann. Even as she was speaking, she stooped and entered the low, narrow tunnel.

Obediently Peggy and Florence followed at her heels. No sooner had they entered than they began coughing and choking.

"Don't touch the——" Florence stopped in the middle of her warning to sneeze loudly; at the same moment such a violent attack of coughing seized Peggy that she leaned against the wall.

"Don't lean against—that wall!" gasped Flor-

ence, catching her by the arm. "Whenever you do"—she stopped to sneeze again—"it stirs up a fine dust. See!" she added, rubbing her finger over the wall. In the rays of the lights they could see a fine white powder which had formed on the crumbling stones. "The air's very dry, and the least movement sets the powder in motion."

Careful to avoid touching the walls or making a sudden motion that would stir up the dust, they began examining their surroundings. Before them as far as they could see stretched the dark passageway, part of its walls having apparently been cut through natural stone, while the other part had been lined with blocks of limestone. It was the dust from these limestone blocks which had choked them, Florence noticed.

After they had walked a short distance the opening broadened and was much higher. It was easy to avoid touching the walls now, and even Jo Ann could stand without bumping her head. With Jo Ann still in the lead they walked slowly in single file down the passage. All along the way they kept flashing their lights on the walls

and ceiling and floor, watching carefully lest they overlook something.

"Where do you suppose we are now, Jo?" called Peggy some minutes later.

"I don't know for sure, of course, but I think we're headed toward the old church. I had an idea we'd find something like this."

"I believe you're right," agreed Florence. "This tunnel must 've been used for a secret exit through the church."

"I think it's more than just an exit," declared Jo Ann. "They would never have made this tunnel this broad and high or lined it with stone if it were to be used merely as a way of escape."

"What else could it 've been used for, then—and who do you suppose ever had it made in the first place?" Florence asked curiously.

"I believe your house used to be closely connected with the church in some way—maybe it was used as a home for the priests. Back in the days when these buildings were erected, they were always having wars and revolutions. This tunnel would make it possible for the priests to get over to the church, no matter what was going

on outside. Then just think what an excellent place this would be to hide anyone or anything! I believe it was used as a hiding place in war times as well as an——" She stopped suddenly. "Oh, here's another tunnel!" she exclaimed as she peered into another large opening in the side of the passageway. "And this one goes on farther."

"It looks as if there's a network of passages," put in Peggy excitedly as she and Florence crowded near Jo Ann to see this discovery. "I wonder where they go and what they were for."

"We'll explore them and find out; but we must be careful not to get lost," cautioned Jo Ann. "No one 'd ever know what had happened to us. They'd think we'd just evaporated in thin air."

"Ugh!" shuddered Peggy. "Don't even mention such a thing. It gives me the creeps."

"Oh, look, here's a little niche in the wall!" exclaimed Florence. "And look—what is this?" she asked, holding up a queer-shaped piece of dark metal.

"It looks like some sort of a candle holder to

me," Peggy volunteered. "The priests must have kept candles there to use when going back and forth through the——" She stopped abruptly and sprang back, shrieking. Something black and winged had struck her in the face.

The next moment Florence cried excitedly, "What is that awful thing?" She slapped madly at a passing object, then began to sneeze violently.

For a few moments the air was white with dust about the girls as they huddled together, choking and gasping.

"That's—just—bats!" gasped Jo Ann at last, as the air became clearer. "We frightened—them."

"You mean—they—frightened us," corrected Peggy. "Aren't we brave, though?"

"I'll admit I was startled at first," acknowledged Florence. "I couldn't imagine what those horrid flapping things were."

Before venturing any further they looked anxiously all around, but to their relief they could see no more of the terrifying little creatures.

"Which way shall we go?" asked Jo Ann. "Straight ahead, or shall we see where this side tunnel leads?"

"I'll tell you what to do," suggested Peggy. "While you and Florence explore that side passage, I'll wait here in this main tunnel. That way you can't get lost—and if you get frightened, just call me, and I'll answer so you'll know how to get back."

"Are you sure you won't be afraid?" asked Jo Ann. "We won't be gone long."

"Why, of course I'm not afraid," bragged Peggy. "Anyway, there's nothing to be afraid of —except those miserable bats, and we've frightened them away."

"All right, then," agreed Jo Ann. "You be sure to stay right here."

Peggy grinned. "Don't worry about me. I'll be all right. It's you two who 're going into the unknown."

Standing in the opening where the tunnels joined, she watched Florence and Jo Ann disappear into the darkness. Finally only a dim light flickered in the distance, then vanished alto-

gether. She was alone—alone with the dust of the centuries about her.

Jo Ann's voice floated back just then with surprising clearness. "Everything all right?"

"Okay," Peggy called back, more cheerfully than she felt.

CHAPTER XIV

GHOSTLY FIGURES

WHEN JO ANN and Florence had gone only a short distance, they noticed the tunnel curved so that they could not see Peggy's light.

"Poor Peg's alone now—she can't even see our lights," said Florence. "I almost wish we hadn't left her back there."

"If she'll stay right where we left her, she ought to be all right. But this is the darkest place I was ever in—spooky, too."

They walked slowly, stopping every now and then to examine the sides and top of the tunnel.

Jo Ann suddenly pointed to the top. "Look up there! There's a crack."

"Let's go back—that looks scary to me!" Florence exclaimed quickly. "It might cave in."

"No, that small a crack couldn't be dangerous. Come on."

Jo Ann started on again, and reluctantly Flor-

ence followed. In spite of her seeming indifference to danger, Jo Ann was really examining the walls and top more cautiously than ever.

"Here's another crack!" she exclaimed a few minutes later. "Maybe there's been an earthquake near here. They do have earthquakes down here sometimes, don't they?"

"Yes, now and then—slight ones," Florence replied. "Don't you think we'd better go back? Poor Peg may be getting lonesome, and we told her we wouldn't be gone long."

Jo Ann half smiled. "Maybe she is, but let's go a little farther. Surely we'll come to the end of this tunnel soon."

"There's no telling how long it is—it might be miles long. Let's go back."

"In a minute. I see something ahead—something whitish. Maybe it's a little opening and the moonlight's shining through." Jo Ann stopped and pointed directly ahead.

"Oh, I do see it!" Florence exclaimed. "It does look white."

Eagerly Jo Ann led the way onward, but not without watching for anything that might be

dangerous. When they had gone a few yards farther, she suddenly cried, "Why, it's a cave-in!"

"You see—I told you we'd better go back. Come on." Florence turned around and started toward the entrance. When she had gone only a few steps she noticed that Jo Ann was not following her. Looking back, she saw her leaning over, examining the pile of debris and fallen stones.

"Look! The tunnel's almost blocked by this cave-in!" Jo Ann called. "There's only a small opening left over here on one side."

"Well, we can't go any farther, so let's get out before it caves in some more," insisted Florence.

"I don't believe there's any danger of that. Look at the dust on these stones. They've been here for years and years. Maybe a cannon ball shattered this part of the tunnel in one of the wars."

"Maybe so, but I'll feel better when we get away from here." A moment later she cried out in alarm on seeing Jo Ann climb up toward the hole. "Jo, you mustn't crawl in there!"

"Why not? I want to see if this is the end of the tunnel. There isn't any danger. These stones are solid. See, I've felt every one of them." Jo Ann pushed first one stone, then another, to show that there was no danger of their slipping; then with her flashlight ahead of her she thrust her head and shoulders into the opening.

To her disappointment she could see only a short distance. Eager to see as far as possible, she wriggled carefully over the jagged stones, farther into the opening, and held her flashlight at arm's length.

"Oh, this is nothing but a little cave-in!" she called back in a muffled tone. "The tunnel goes on a long way. There's no sign of the end of it. Let's crawl on through."

"No indeed, I'm not going in that hole," Florence replied promptly. "And you'd better get out right a——"

A muffled shriek from Jo Ann broke into her sentence. "Oh, I've dropped my flashlight on the other side! Now I've—" she stopped to cough violently—"I've got to crawl through—and get it."

"Don't crawl clear through—you might not be able to get back!" Florence's voice was full of anxiety. "Let me hold your feet while you reach for the flashlight." Without waiting for an answer she grasped Jo Ann's feet firmly.

Slowly then Jo Ann wriggled still farther into the hole. The farther she crawled, the nearer Florence was pulled to the opening. With a sudden jerk Jo Ann reached over to get her flashlight. In her effort she threw Florence against the pile of debris and stirred up the fine dust, which set both of them to coughing and struggling for air.

"Hurry up—and—crawl—out," begged Florence between gasps.

"Coming—this instant. Pull me—back. I—can't—make it—by myself."

Florence laid down her flashlight and began pulling at Jo Ann's feet.

"Pull harder," Jo Ann grunted.

"I'm pulling—as hard as I can."

"I haven't budged. Pull again—and I'll wiggle as hard as I can. These sharp stones hurt like fury."

Once more Florence braced herself and pulled with all her strength. The next moment one of Jo Ann's oxfords slipped off, and Florence was sent sprawling backward on the floor. In the cloud of dust that arose, Florence caught a glimpse of Jo Ann's feet disappearing in the hole.

But Jo Ann and Florence were not the only ones who were having their troubles. Peggy, too, was having her share. No sooner had the girls' lights disappeared than she began to get restless. Everything looked so much more gloomy and alarming in the faint glow of one flashlight. When she threw its rays directly in front, they penetrated the darkness only a short distance and cast eerie shadows on the walls near by.

"It's silly to get scared of the dark and shadows this way," she scolded herself.

With an effort she tried to concentrate on the persons who had built these tunnels. Patient people they must have been to cut these passages through solid stone with their old crude tools. They were probably Indian workmen, experienced in cutting stone. It must have taken them years and years to make these.

All at once it seemed to her that the shadow on her right took the form of a crouching Indian.

"Here I am being silly again," she thought. "It's because I'm standing still here that I'm nervous. It's lonesome as well as scary, staying still in a spooky place like this."

Looking around for something to divert her mind, she noticed the queer-shaped piece of metal in the niche and wondered what Florence had done with the other one. "Perhaps she dropped it when the bats frightened her," she thought.

She cast the rays of her light over the floor till she finally found the piece of metal, then placed it back in the niche with its mate. "Jo and I can use one of these for a candle holder on the little table beside our bed, and Florence can use the other," she decided.

Not seeing anything else of interest, she grew more restless than ever. "I wonder where this tunnel leads. I believe I'll walk down it a little way. Florence and Jo probably won't be back for several minutes. There's no sign of their lights

yet. I won't go but a few steps. They might call, and I couldn't hear them."

She walked slowly a short distance, looking carefully on all sides. When she had gone about twelve feet she came to a narrow opening on her right.

She stopped and peered into it as far as her light would permit. "This place is certainly a network of passages," she thought. "I wonder what this narrow one's for."

Her curiosity aroused, she turned into this new passage and kept straight ahead for a little way. Then as she flashed her light about, she caught a glimpse of another opening, to her left. Glancing into this opening, she saw at the farther end what appeared to be a door half ajar.

Her eyes began to shine. "Surely I'll find something important behind that door," she thought. "It 'd be a rich joke on Jo and Florence if I should be the one to make some great discovery."

With her heart thumping rapidly she walked down to the door, peeped in, then cautiously opened the door wider and stepped inside. To

her great disappointment the room was absolutely bare.

"Just my luck!" she groaned. "I thought surely I was going to find something interesting to show the girls."

Disgusted, she hurried out of the room and back to the passage, then turned quickly to her left and hastened on.

"One more turn, and I'll be back in the main tunnel," she told herself.

When she had gone a short distance, she discovered that the passage apparently ended a few feet ahead.

"Why, this isn't the way I came!" she cried in alarm. Her heart seemed to leap up into her throat, and her eyes dilated in horror. "Why, I'm lost! Lost!"

The next moment she ordered herself sternly, "Don't lose your head! Go back and retrace your steps to that opening. You've taken the wrong turn—that's all."

With a fresh grip on her emotions she wheeled about and walked to the opening from which she had just emerged.

"Oh, here's where I made my mistake!" she exclaimed in relief. "I turned to the left instead of the right. What a stupid I was!"

She started on again and kept straight ahead till she reached the entrance to the main tunnel.

As her light shone on the wall directly in front of her she suddenly halted in surprise. There, a little to her right, was a recess in the wall with a long, solid-looking panel in the back.

"That's strange!" she thought. "I wonder what that panel's for."

She flashed her light straight into the recess this time. In the circle of light a black metal ring stood out distinctly. Could this queer-looking panel be a door? If it were, then there was another room here only a few feet from her.

Timidly she caught hold of the metal ring the next moment and pulled; to her disappointment, the panel did not move.

"There must be a reason for this ring and this panel," she told herself. "I'll try again, harder."

Putting her shoulder against the panel, she pushed with all her strength. There was a sudden, loud, grating noise; then the door swung

open with such force that she lost her balance and fell full length on the floor.

Her first thought was about her flashlight. What a terrible plight she would be in if it were broken! Trembling with anxiety, she pressed the button of her light. Out flashed its rays as brightly as ever. Half curiously, half timidly she stared into the lighted area.

The next instant her eyes dilated in terror. What was that horrible-looking creature directly in front of her!

"O-o-oh!" she shrieked. "Jo! Jo!"

After that one shriek her throat contracted with fright, and she lay as if paralyzed.

That horrible thing was so near she could almost touch it. Was it man—or beast—some prehistoric animal? She had never—not even in her wildest imagination—seen anything like this hideous monster. It stood in an upright position like a man and had long scrawny arms and legs, and huge frightful claws which seemed to be reaching out to grab her. Its head was hunched between its shoulders, and over the whole thing was a long, scraggly, hairlike covering.

With eyes fastened on the creature Peggy waited breathlessly. If only the thing would move or do something! Anything would be better than this suspense. But still it stood—motionless. If only she could manage to slide or crawl out of the room! But that monster would be sure to follow stealthily. Yet she must do something. She *must* get out of this room.

Forcing her eyes for a second from the monster, she glanced toward the door. The next instant she shuddered in fresh terror. There beside the door, almost at her feet, loomed another monster, taller and more horrible than the first.

Almost simultaneously there came a soft thudding sound from the tunnel. What could that be? Some other menace? It was getting nearer—nearer.

Suddenly above the thudding sounded a high-pitched voice—Jo Ann's voice! Jo and Florence were running to her rescue! They had heard her scream.

"You must get out of this room this instant and warn the girls of their danger," she commanded herself sternly.

Carefully, slowly, almost without seeming to move, she backed feet first toward the door. To reach it she had to pass so close to this other taller and more horrible creature that she would almost touch it. She held her breath. Already she could feel the clutch of those clawlike hands.

Steeling herself, she inched her body a little nearer. Out of the corner of her eye she watched those threatening claws. Brown leathery claws they were—dried—wrinkled—ghastly.

All at once the reason for their ghastly appearance darted into her mind—the hideous creatures were *dead!*

With a cry of relief she sprang to her feet and stumbled through the door. Just as she stepped into the tunnel, Jo Ann and Florence rushed up, panting.

"Peg—what's—the matter?" Jo Ann cried, throwing her arms around Peggy. "I was afraid something dreadful——"

"What did happen, Peg?" urged Florence between gasps for breath as she flashed her light full upon Peggy.

Struggling to make her voice sound natural,

Peggy replied slowly, "I—was—just scared. I'm —sorry—I frightened you."

"What frightened you?" Jo Ann put in quickly. "You're white as a ghost."

"That's what I've been seeing—ghosts! Ugh!" Peggy shivered.

"This is no time for foolishness. What scared you?"

"Peep through that door and see for yourself, then," Peggy replied.

All curiosity, Jo Ann turned quickly toward the open door, Florence at her heels. The next moment both girls drew back with cries of fright.

"Horrible!" ejaculated Florence.

"Horrible!" echoed Jo Ann. "No wonder you were frightened, Peg," she added quickly. "They're only mummies, but if I hadn't read about them I'd have been paralyzed. But what made you come up here after you said you'd stay where we left you?"

"I got tired waiting for you—I thought you'd never come—so I decided to explore this tunnel a little way. I got lost for a while; and then on

my way back I found this door. It wouldn't open at first, so I pushed hard—and then I tumbled head foremost into that room. When I turned on my light and saw those horrible creatures—well, I 'most died from fright. I thought they were alive."

"You poor child," comforted Florence. "We should never have left you alone."

"What made you two stay so long?"

"We went farther than we expected, and Jo got stuck in a hole."

Peggy turned to Jo Ann. "You would do something like that! What kind of a hole was it?"

"Just a little opening in a cave-in. I wanted to see what was on the other side. I dropped my flashlight over there and got stuck trying to get it."

"I had to pull her out—I had a time doing it," Florence added.

"That wasn't nearly as much trouble as I got into," said Peggy with a gesture toward the door. "How'd those hideous things ever get in there?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied Jo Ann. "I've read that they've been found in some parts

of Mexico, and that they're different from the ancient Egyptian mummies in that no preservatives were used. The air in certain parts of this country has such drying qualities in it that centuries ago people discovered that they could keep bodies perfectly without the use of preservatives."

"Ugh! They don't look perfect to me," put in Peggy.

Jo Ann stepped to the door, saying, "I'd like to examine those mummies more closely, but——"

"That's the way we feel, don't we, Florence?" Peggy said with a half smile as she and Florence crowded into the doorway. "What is that whitish stuff on them?" she asked the next moment.

"I imagine they were wrapped in a sort of shroud when they were put in there," said Jo Ann, "but it's almost evaporated."

"Why do you suppose they're standing straight up, Jo?" Peggy queried curiously. "I should think they'd be in coffins, or something."

Jo Ann shook her head dubiously. "Some ancient custom, perhaps."

"Didn't you start out to find the family skeleton, Jo?" asked Florence, with a twinkle in her eyes. "It seems to me Peggy found it, and all of its ancestors, for you."

Peggy shuddered. "It's a good thing I didn't know there were so many mummies in this room. Let's get away from here. I've seen enough of these horrible-looking things to last me a lifetime. You have, too, haven't you, Florence?"

Florence nodded an emphatic assent and added, "Surely you've looked at them long enough, Jo. Come on."

Reluctantly Jo Ann turned to leave. "I'd like to go inside and look over the room, but since you insist, I s'pose I'll have to go."

Peggy took a few steps down the passage, calling back over her shoulder, "Shut the door, Jo. I found it closed, so we'd better leave it that way."

"All right." Jo Ann caught hold of the ring and pulled on it, but the door would not budge.

After pulling on it several more times without success she called out, "The door's stuck—I'll have to try pushing. Catch hold of the ring and

pull, Peg, while I push, and, Florence, you shine your light in here so I can see," she added as she stepped into the room.

Bracing herself against the wall, she slipped her arm into the narrow space behind the door and began pushing. With one wary glance at the ghostly figures back of her, Peggy pulled vigorously on the ring.

Suddenly the door gave a loud grating noise and swung so quickly that Peggy lost her balance and fell back against the mummies. With a terrified shriek she sprang back.

At the same instant Jo Ann felt something hard bump against her leg as she tumbled back against the wall. Guessing what had happened to Peggy, she reached for her flashlight hanging to her belt. No sooner had she flashed on the light than Peggy was by her side, shivering and pale with fright.

"Ugh! I fell against those hideous mummies!" she exclaimed. "Let's get out of here this instant."

"Something struck me, too," said Jo Ann, glancing down in the corner back of the door.

There before her eyes lay several large candelabra.

"Oh, look here, Peg!" she cried excitedly.

"They're just old iron candlesticks," Peggy replied shortly. "Come on."

Not heeding Peggy's words, Jo Ann reached down and picked up one of them and began examining it closely. "I believe this is gold—a golden candelabrum!" she exclaimed admiringly. "Look at the lovely design on the base—and aren't the branches beautifully shaped!"

Just then Florence peered around the half-open door and called out, "What's happened to you two? Why don't you come on out?"

"We've made a wonderful discovery," replied Jo Ann. "Come here and see."

As soon as Florence came inside Jo Ann pointed triumphantly to the candelabra. "They're gold—maybe solid gold!"

After a moment's tribute of silence Florence remarked, "They're beautiful. I don't believe they're all gold; those darker ones are probably silver and tarnished with age." She reached down and lifted one of the duller-looking can-

delabra. "It certainly is heavy. Isn't this design on the base exquisite?" As she placed it back on the floor she added, "I believe all these belong to the church."

"Probably they were hidden here long ago during some war or revolution and then forgotten," Jo Ann said thoughtfully. "Maybe the persons who put them here were killed, and so——" She stopped abruptly, then began again, "I shouldn't wonder if there were more valuable things hidden down here. I want to see, too, if there aren't steps leading up to the church. Come on."

CHAPTER XV

THE BLACK BOX

PAST THE GHOSTLY FIGURES the three girls made their way, nervous shivers running up and down their spines in spite of the fact that they knew these figures would not harm them.

As they threw the rays from their lights on the rear wall of the room, Jo Ann suddenly halted. "This wall's different from the others," she announced. "It looks as if it's made of stone panels."

"It certainly does," agreed Florence.

Eagerly Jo Ann began examining one of the panels, testing it to see if it would move. Following her example, Peggy and Florence began trying to move the ones nearest them. Each panel, they discovered, had a slight depression carved in the top, which served as a fingerhold.

After they had worked for several minutes without success, Peggy said disgustedly, "Let's

stop this foolishness and get out of this awful room. These panels look like vaults or tombs—like the ones we saw in that old St. Roch's Cemetery in New Orleans. I've seen enough spooks and family skeletons to do me for ages." She tugged at Jo Ann's arm impatiently.

Almost simultaneously Jo Ann exclaimed, "Oh, I've found a panel that moves! Shine your light this way, Peg, while Florence helps me to shove it up."

Together Jo Ann and Florence pushed vigorously on the panel.

"Fine! It's moving!" ejaculated Jo Ann finally. "Once more, Florence—hard, now!"

Peggy threw the rays from her flashlight directly into the narrow crack now appearing below the stone. "Oh, I see something—something white! Push the stone up a little higher, can't you?" Turning suddenly to Florence, she ordered, "You hold the light and let me push. I'm stronger than you."

In a few more moments there was a loud grating sound as the stone moved, and the crack below widened several inches.

"There's something in there, all right," agreed Florence. "If you promise not to let that stone drop on my hand, I'll reach in and get it. Can you hold it?"

"Let's get a better hold first!" cried Jo Ann. "My hand's slipping. Now, are you ready, Peg?"

"Okay."

Quickly Florence reached through the crack. "Feels like a box!" she exclaimed excitedly. "But I can't get it out. There's a roll of paper or something, too."

"We'll push a little harder," said Jo Ann. "Push, Peg—with all your might. Now—can you—get hold—of them?"

"I've got them!" Florence's voice was triumphant. "Hold it just another second so I can see if there's anything else." She flashed the light into the opening again.

"Hurry!" cut in Peggy. "We can't—hold this thing—much longer. It weighs a ton."

"I can't see anything else," Florence said a moment later. "Let it go."

With sighs of relief Jo Ann and Peggy let the slab drop into place.

"Whew—that stone was heavy!" gasped Peggy. She glanced disappointedly at the small black box and roll of paper which Florence held in her hand. "And all that hard work for nothing but a little insignificant-looking box and a piece of paper! I told you these were nothing but grave vaults. Let's get out of this cemetery."

After one last glance around the room Jo Ann followed Peggy and Florence to the door.

"I'm glad the door's not stuck this time," she remarked as she pulled it shut.

As she turned to join the girls Florence called, "Look right down this passage, Jo. There's another cave-in."

Flashing her light in that direction, Jo Ann exclaimed, "You're right—that is a cave-in. There've been steps there, too. This must 've been the passage leading up into the church. It looks as if the whole side of the building has fallen down."

"I know where we are, then," Florence put in. "We're right under that section of the church that's partly in ruins. That's the reason no one's been down here in years and years."

Now that her curiosity was satisfied about the

passage to the church, Jo Ann turned to Florence. "You still have the box and the paper you took out of that vault, haven't you?"

"Yes, but they don't look at all interesting or valuable."

With one glance at the dull black box Jo Ann reached out and took the roll of papers from Florence.

"Oh dear," she sighed a moment later, "they're all in Spanish, of course. This is the queerest writing—all fancy flourishes and curlycues. I can't make anything out of it, can you, Florence?"

Florence looked down at the papers a moment, then shook her head. "All that I can make out of it is that it's some kind of old record."

"Let me have a look at the box, then. Maybe it 'll explain something."

As Florence handed it to Jo Ann she remarked, "If you can find out anything from this old black box, you're a good one."

"I thoroughly agree with you. It doesn't look at all interesting." Jo Ann turned the box from side to side. "It's unusually heavy, though, for

such a small box." She shook it vigorously. "Listen! There's something inside that makes a little rattling noise."

"It can't be anything much—not in that small box," commented Peggy.

"I wish we could open it," said Jo Ann, studying the box while Florence held the light. "It must have a secret spring—there's no sign of a keyhole."

"A secret spring!" Peggy's interest was instantly aroused. "Let me see it, will you?"

When Peggy reached out to take the box, its weight took her by surprise, and she let it slip out of her hands and fall crashing to the floor.

Dropping down on their knees, Jo Ann and Peggy reached for the box at the same time.

"O—oh!" gasped Jo Ann, her voice quivering with excitement.

"O—oh!" echoed Peggy.

"What is it?" Florence asked quickly as she leaned over their shoulders.

Spellbound the three girls gazed before them. The insignificant black box lay on its side, wide open, part of its contents spilled out on the floor.

There was the gleam of old gold and the brilliant sparkle and flash of fire. All the colors of the rainbow seemed reflected in that circle of light.

"How perfectly magnificent!" ejaculated Peggy in an awed voice.

"Wonderful! An old jewel case!" exclaimed Jo Ann, entranced by the beauty before her.

"Gorgeous!" added Florence.

One by one, as though afraid of touching them, the girls picked up the jewels from the floor. Rings set with precious stones—diamonds, rubies, sapphires, opals gorgeous as the sunset—necklaces, earrings, and chains of gold. Queer, antique-looking, all of them.

"Isn't this the loveliest thing you ever laid your eyes on!" cried Peggy, holding up a filigree necklace of such delicate workmanship that it resembled a piece of fine old lace.

"It's exquisite," agreed Florence.

"And look at this ring—isn't it the most beautiful one you ever saw?" Jo Ann held up a ring that had one large exquisite opal circled by tiny diamonds. "I love opals. The opal's my birth-

stone. When my ship comes in—if it ever does—I'll try to buy me a ring just like this."

"It is lovely. They all are—the diamonds, rubies, all of them," added Florence. "They must be very valuable. I wonder why they were hidden here. Oh!" she cried suddenly, an expression of horror passing over her face. "These belong to the church. We can't take them—that 'd be stealing. We must put them right back where we found them this minute."

"Not I," said Peggy emphatically.

"What would be the sense of leaving these things hidden for another century or more?" put in Jo Ann quickly.

"I don't know, but I still feel that we'll be stealing if we take them," insisted Florence.

"I know what we'd better do!" exclaimed Jo Ann as a sudden solution of the problem occurred to her. "We can take them to Señor Rodriguez and let him dispose of them in the proper legal manner. Don't you think that would be best?"

"Yes—perhaps so," slowly agreed Florence. "He ought to know what would be right."

While Florence and Jo Ann had been arguing about what to do with the pieces of jewelry, Peggy was putting them back in the black box.

"I can't get all these things back in this box," she sighed finally. "How in the world did they ever get so much in such a small box?"

"Wait! Don't close it. We might not be able to get it open again." Jo Ann reached over and took the box. "Let me tie this string around it so nothing 'll spill out."

In a few minutes the box was securely tied. Holding it tightly, Jo Ann hastened back to the entrance to the tunnel, the other girls following closely.

CHAPTER XVI

MORE PRECIOUS THAN JEWELS

AT THE VERY MOMENT that Peggy was lying terror-stricken at the feet of the mummies Dr. Blackwell had just made an alarming discovery.

He had been wakened from a deep peaceful sleep by the sound of vigorous knocking on the outer door and had quickly scrambled out of bed and into his clothes. He well knew that this knocking meant that someone was in distress and needed his professional services. Louder and louder had come the sound. Fearing that everyone in the house would be awakened, he had hurried down to answer the door.

When he had not seen Florence at the head of the stairs, waiting to bolt the door as usual, he had gone to her room and found it empty and the beds undisturbed. Immediately he had run from room to room, calling the girls, but

had heard only the echoes of his own worried voice. All three girls had utterly disappeared!

A terrible fear swept over him—they had been kidnaped! But no, that was impossible, he told himself the next moment. Three strong, healthy girls could not be carried off without making a sound.

What should he do? Call the police? Something must be done immediately, but there was so much red tape connected with governmental affairs in this country that it would be hours before anything could be done. Perhaps it would be better to call his good friend Señor Rodriguez. He would advise him the best steps to take.

Quickly, his hand shaking so he could scarcely write, he scribbled a note to the Señor. It was almost illegible, but the words, "Come at once" were plain, and that was all that was necessary.

Rushing down the stairs, he hurried past the man waiting at the door, without speaking. The man stared after him in blank amazement. What was the matter? Was the *Doctor Americano loco?*

On across the street ran Dr. Blackwell to the

corner of the Plaza, where a taxi could be found at any hour of the day or night.

He shook the sleeping taxi driver by the shoulder. *"Hombre, hombre,* wake up! Take this letter to the Señor Rodriguez and bring him back with you. *Muy pronto, sabe?"*

The lazy, easy-going Mexican straightened in surprise. He had carried this American doctor on many an urgent call, but he had never seen him so nervous and excited before. This must be something very important. Very well, he would show *el doctor* how he could hurry. There was a roar, the grinding of gears, and the car was off like a shot.

In an amazingly short time Señor Rodriguez rushed into the office. He found Dr. Blackwell slumped in a chair, his face in his hands.

"Doctor, what has happened? What is the matter?" he asked in Spanish.

In a few halting words Dr. Blackwell told him of the girls' disappearance. "What shall I do, señor?" he ended, his voice vibrant with emotion.

Before the amazed Señor could take in the

situation and answer this question, there was the sound of light, flying feet on the balcony floor.

The next moment, after one swift glance at her father, Florence dropped on her knees at his feet, exclaiming, "Daddy! Are you sick?"

Startled at the sound of her voice, Dr. Blackwell almost jumped out of his chair. "Florence!" he cried. "Florence!"

"What's the matter, Daddy?" she asked anxiously.

In the moment of silence that followed her question she turned to Señor Rodriguez. "Tell me what's happened, señor."

"Where'd you come from?" Dr. Blackwell put in before the Señor could speak. "How'd you get here? Oh, child, I've been so frightened and worried! I thought something terrible had happened to you and the girls. Where are they?"

"Right here," answered Jo Ann, who had just come running in with Peggy. "Don't—blame Florence—it's really—all my fault."

"Why, Dad, there's nothing the matter with us—we're all right," said Florence, rising. "We just went up on the roof and——"

"What *are* you girls talking about?" he demanded, noticing for the first time their disreputable appearance—their grimy faces, Jo's bloodstained shirt, and their knickers. "What have you been doing?"

"We've been solving the mystery," eagerly explained Florence.

"What mystery?"

"Why, the mystery of that strange little window in the back of the house."

"But how did you get out of the house without unbolting the door? You know better than to go out at this hour of night."

"Don't scold, Dad," begged Florence. "We haven't been down on the street. We climbed through the little window and found a tunnel under the street."

"A tunnel!" he repeated, bewildered. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"Why, there's a long tunnel that starts under the back of our house and goes under the street, clear to the church—and I don't know how much farther—there's a regular network of passages, and——"

While Florence stopped to catch her breath, her father turned to Señor Rodriguez. "Do you know anything about a tunnel under the street?"

Señor Rodriguez shook his head, a puzzled expression on his face.

By that time Florence had started talking again, her words tumbling over each other in her hurry. "And we've found lots of valuable things—candelabra—old papers—and jewels! Real jewels! Diamonds—rubies. Open the box, Jo, and show them!"

With fingers fumbling in her haste Jo Ann was already untying the string about the box. Her eyes shining, she turned its contents upon a chair in front of Dr. Blackwell. Under the bright lights the jewels sparkled far more brilliantly than they had in the tunnel.

In the silence that followed, the three girls waited breathlessly. What would Dr. Blackwell and the Señor say about their discovery? Would they be forgiven now for the anxiety they had caused?

After a long pause Dr. Blackwell gently pulled Florence down on the arm of his chair.

"They're beautiful," he said, "but I shudder to think of the risks you three took to get them—of what might have happened to you. No one would ever have known where you were. I'm so thankful to have you all back safe and sound. You're far more precious to me than these jewels."

"Oh, but, doctor, it wasn't as dangerous as it sounds," put in Jo Ann eagerly. "We were very careful." Recalling some of her moments of anxiety in the past few hours, she hesitated and added a little less confidently, "Perhaps it was more dangerous than we realized, but we're all right now, and we wanted so badly to solve the mystery of that window and to surprise you."

A smile passed over Dr. Blackwell's face. "You surprised me all right."

Encouraged by this change of expression on the doctor's face, Jo Ann went on, "I'm sorry you were worried. We thought we'd get back before you discovered we were gone. You'll forgive us, won't you?"

"Yes," Dr. Blackwell replied slowly, "provided you all promise never to risk your precious lives that way again."

"Oh, we'll promise that, won't we, girls?"

Florence and Peggy nodded an emphatic assent.

With a wave of her hand toward the jewels Jo Ann added, "Now that we've explored that tunnel and found all these, we're satisfied." She turned then and handed Señor Rodriguez the old yellowed papers. "I'm sure you'll be interested in these papers. They look like old records."

Curiously the Señor unrolled one of the old documents and began reading it. Soon he was poring over them, oblivious of everything else.

In the meanwhile the girls examined the jewels more closely and reveled in their beauty.

Dr. Blackwell interrupted their chatter finally, saying, "I haven't been able to piece together all your disjointed account of your adventures. Suppose you begin at the first, Jo, since you were the originator of the whole thing, and tell the whole story."

Jo Ann needed no second invitation. She began at once to give a vivid account of their getting the rope and their climb to the roof; then

went on to their descent into the hidden room and the tunnel; and finally to the discovery of the candelabra, papers, and jewelry. With the help of Peggy and Florence not even the smallest detail was left untold.

"An amazing tale," Dr. Blackwell commented when they had finished, "but I'm still shuddering about the risks you took."

Eager to change the subject, Jo Ann turned to Señor Rodriguez and asked, "Can you make anything out of these papers?"

"Yes, Mees Jo." There was a tinge of excitement in the Señor's voice in spite of his attempt to appear calm. "Dey are ver' old records and I t'ink may be ver' valuable. One hab de name of my gran'modder's family. If dey are what I t'ink —ah, dat would be wonderful! Somet'ing dat has been lost for many, many years—how you say in Ingles?—de missing link? Wid your permission I would like to take dem to my office and study dem."

"That's just what we want you to do. I can hardly wait to find out more about them. We would like your advice, too, about what to do

with all these beautiful things." She gestured toward the jewels and then, reaching over, picked up the opal ring that had so fascinated her. "This is the most beautiful opal I've ever seen, and it's set so artistically. I'm glad my birthday's in October, so it's not unlucky for me to wear an opal, since I'm particularly fond of that stone."

The Señor smiled. "Since it's your lucky stone, try this ring on, Mees Jo."

Obediently Jo Ann slipped the ring on her finger. "Oh, señor, it's lovely."

While she was still admiring it, Peggy picked up the filigree necklace. "This is the daintiest piece of all, I think," she remarked.

"And this is the most beautiful, according to my notion," smiled Florence, pointing to a bracelet of old gold set with sapphires and tiny diamonds. "The sapphire is my birthstone."

Señor Rodriguez was much pleased by the girls' admiration. "De people of my country are ver' artistic," he said. "Dey make many beautiful t'ings."

"To whom do you think all these jewels and

things belong?" Jo Ann asked. "And why were they put in that room under the church?"

"Mees Jo, I do not know. I am ver' sorry dat I cannot answer you dat. I have heard dat long ago in de wars de people carried der most valuable t'ings to de church for safe keeping. I may be able to find out who owns dese from de papers."

"I'm sure these jewels are very valuable," Dr. Blackwell remarked in Spanish to the Señor. "I'm away so much that I don't like to leave the girls alone with them in the house. Would you take charge of them till you find out to whom they belong?"

Señor Rodriguez nodded. "Yes, if you wish, doctor. I will be glad to take them and put them in my safe till I find out to whom they belong."

CHAPTER XVII

THE SEÑOR'S STORY

IN THE DAYS that followed the discovery of the papers and jewels the girls were all impatience to hear from Señor Rodriguez. Jo Ann especially was restless. Always she had disliked inaction, and now she wanted to find out everything "right straight away." She failed to realize that the Señor was having to search through scores of old city records for information, and that, like a true Spaniard, he was thorough—painstakingly accurate in every detail.

Again and again the three girls talked over that eventful night and the unanswered questions—Why had those things been hidden in that underground room? Why had no one found them before? To whom did they belong?

"Since we found those things under the church, they probably belong to the church," Jo Ann declared thoughtfully one morning in one

of these discussions. Her eyes suddenly began to shine as she added, "I know what I wish they'd do if the jewels belong to them—sell them and take the money to restore that part of the building that's in ruins. The people are too poor to have it repaired. Such an old historic building ought not to be allowed to fall into decay. Then, if there were any money left after the repairing was done, it could be used for a special relief fund for the poor people."

"Those are both fine ideas," approved Florence.

"I wish I had enough money to buy that lovely filigree necklace, if the jewels are sold," put in Peggy. Her face lengthened. "I know, though, it 'd be more expensive than I could afford."

"I'd love to have that beautiful opal ring," spoke up Jo Ann wistfully.

Florence half sighed as she added, "That bracelet with my birthstone and the tiny diamonds was so attractive."

To the girls' delight at lunch that day Dr. Blackwell announced that at four o'clock Señor

Rodriguez was coming over to tell them what he had found out about the records and jewels.

"My, but I'm glad!" exclaimed Jo Ann. "I was beginning to think he'd never come."

By half-past three the girls were waiting eagerly in Dr. Blackwell's office for the Señor's coming. Peggy and Florence chatted gaily with Dr. Blackwell, but Jo Ann kept glancing nervously at her watch. She felt that this was one of the most important events in her whole life. If only she could be instrumental in restoring that old church—that would be wonderful!

At last voices were heard in the hall, and Felipe ushered in Señor Rodriguez and, to their surprise, Padre Ignacio.

As soon as greetings had been exchanged, Señor Rodriguez placed the yellowed papers on the table and beside them the jewel box, which no longer was black, but bright and shining.

"Why, the box is silver!" thought Jo Ann, amazed. "He's had it polished till it's beautiful."

Señor Rodriguez was all lawyer now—dignified and formal. "My dear young ladies, I haf de honor of congratulate you on de wonderful

discovery you haf made," he began in his broken English, bowing to each of the girls. "Dese are ver' valuable papers which you haf found—ver' valuable to de city, ver' valuable to de church and to my family," he added, smiling.

The girls smiled back happily. They didn't understand all that he was talking about or why they should receive so much praise, but evidently their discovery was more important than they had realized.

He then went on to explain how, after searching through the archives of the city, studying old records, and checking names and dates, he felt that he could give some authentic information about the papers.

They were records dating before 1846 of some of the oldest most prominent families of the city. Several of the older inhabitants with whom he had talked remembered having heard their parents tell of the exciting times when the city had been besieged by the American forces under General Zachary Taylor. As soon as they had realized they could hold out no longer against the Americans, they had hidden their most valu-

able possessions, of which only a small part had ever been recovered. Tales of vast treasures hidden under the city had been handed down from generation to generation, but few of them seemed to have any foundation.

"Dis General Guerrero whose name you see on dis paper," continued the Señor, picking up one of the papers, "was de fadder of my esteemed gran'fadder. Dey are de records of de families of Guerrero and Rodriguez before 1846. Finding dem will clear de titles to some ver' valuable property which belong to my family."

"Oh, señor, I'm so glad!" exclaimed Florence.

"We are, too, aren't we, Peggy?" added Jo Ann.

The Señor went on to say that when he showed the jewels and papers to his grandmother, she recalled a story told to her in her childhood by her mother just before she died. According to this story her husband, General Guerrero, at the time of the siege, had given her some important papers which he had told her to guard above everything. When the general had realized that

the city could no longer hold out, he had sent a messenger with a hastily written note telling her to send those valuable papers and their jewels to him by this man. She had reluctantly handed the papers and jewels to the messenger, but that was the last she had ever heard or seen of them. As the general had been killed that same day, she supposed the things had been either lost or stolen. For that reason no effort was ever made to recover them.

"And dese are de papers dat were lost," finished the Señor. "How ver' fortunate it is dat you find dem!"

"But how could they have ever got in that secret underground room?" asked Florence.

Señor Rodriguez shook his head. "Dat I do not know. I t'ink perhaps someone carry dem to de *padre,* and he hide dem along wid odder valuable t'ings which had been sent to him. De tunnels under de church had been used for carrying reinforcements and food to de army at de outskirts of de city. Dat is why dey could hold out so long against de American forces."

"No wonder we couldn't find the other end of

the tunnel!" exclaimed Jo Ann. "It must be several miles long." She turned to Señor Rodriguez. "Do the jewels belong to your family, too?"

"Ah, dat I do not know. Some of dem I t'ink belong to my family, but it is impossible to be sure. My gran'modder say she sure dis little ring —dis little ring you admire so much, Mees Jo— was her Gran'modder Guerrero's ring."

He went on to explain how, since they had no way of finding exactly to whom the jewels had belonged, they had decided it would be better to return them to the church, as it had been very poor for years.

"Oh, señor!" exclaimed Jo Ann, her eyes shining. "Will there be enough money then to repair that old ruined part of the church? I think an old historic building like that ought to be restored."

The Señor smiled approvingly. "Dat is a ver' good plan, Mees Jo. De *padre* and I haf already discuss dat." He went on to add that the jewels alone would not be sufficient to furnish funds for the restoring of the building, but that some of the old papers cleared up titles to valuable prop-

erty belonging to the church, and that from this property enough could be secured for that purpose.

"I'm so glad you're going to do that!" rejoiced Jo Ann. "That old church has held a fascination for me from the first time I saw it. To think that we girls will have a part in restoring it—that is wonderful!"

"And they can use those beautiful candelabra we found," put in Florence.

"When they restore that part of the building, they'll open the passage to those underground rooms, and it 'll be easy to get the candelabra out then," said Jo Ann. She turned to the Señor and the *padre*. "You might find more valuable things down there—we didn't search thoroughly." She stopped a moment, then added, "Won't there be enough money to help those poor people who attend the church?"

Señor Rodriguez nodded. "We hope so—we want ver' much to do that." He turned and translated Jo Ann's words to the *padre,* who also nodded approvingly. "Padre Ignacio and I are ver' happy dat you young ladies are so much in-

teres' in our people," the Señor added then, "and we would like to do somet'ing to show you how much we appreciate what you haf done—so—we haf decide to give you each what you like best of de jewels."

The girls exchanged swift glances of surprise.

He poured out the jewels on the table. "I believe Mees Peggy like dis necklace—is it not so?" He handed her the filigree necklace she had admired so much.

"Oh, señor!" gasped Peggy, staring wide-eyed at the bit of loveliness in her hands. "You mean this is really mine?"

"*Sí,* Mees Peggy. It is wid much pleasure dat I present it to you."

"And, Mees Florencita, did you not say you like dis bracelet?" He placed the jewel-set bracelet in her hands.

"Oh, but señor, that is too valuable to give to me," protested Florence.

"No—no," he replied, patting her on the shoulder. "It is of no value compare to what you haf done for us."

"And now, Mees Jo, will you please to come here one moment?"

With cheeks flushed from excitement Jo Ann rose from her chair and came over to the Señor's side.

"To you, my most estimable friend," he began, "you who haf been so much interes' in our city —in de history of our country, and who—how do you say it?—ah, figure t'ings out—who haf accomplis' somet'ing dat seem impossible and restore to us dese ver' valuable papers, we want to give dis token of appreciation—dis little ring." He held up the beautiful opal and diamond ring that Jo Ann had selected as her favorite of all the jewels. "I t'ink that this once belonged to my great-great-gran'modder."

Jo Ann's eyes shone starlike. "It's beautiful—beautiful—but it's such a valuable heirloom—to give to me."

"Because it is an heirloom, I want all de more to give it to you, my friend." The Señor smiled warmly over at her. "Let me put it on your finger."

All happiness, Jo Ann held out her right hand, and the Señor slipped the ring on her third finger with all the dignity of a ceremonial. With equal dignity she bowed and said slowly, "I thank you very much for this wonderful gift and for the honor of wearing your ancestor's ring."

THE END